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D. Murray Smith

H. DE BALZAC

THE PEASANTRY

(*Les Paysans*)

Translated by

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with a Preface by

GEORGE SAINTSBURY

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Drawn and Etched by D. Murray Smith

PREFACE

Few, I suppose, of the readers of *Les Paysans* in more recent years have read it without a more or less distinct mental comparison with the corresponding book in the Rougon-Macquart series. And I should hope that this comparative process has had, in the best minds, only one result. *Les Paysans* (which, by the way, is a very late book, partly posthumous, and is said, though not on positive authority, to have enjoyed the collaboration of Madame de Balzac) is not one of Balzac's best; but it is as far above *La Terre* from every conceivable point of view, except that of Holywell Street, as a play of Shakespeare is above one of Monk Lewis.

The comparison, indeed, exhibits something more than the difference of genius in Balzac and in M. Zola. It illustrates the difference of their methods. We know how not merely the Rougon-Macquart series in general, but *La Terre* in particular, was composed. M. Zola, who is a conscientious man, went down to a village (somewhere in the Beauce, if I recollect rightly), stayed some time, made his notes, and came back to Paris. There is nothing like the same great gulf fixed between the Londoner and the countryman in England as that which exists between the Parisian and the Provincial in France. But imagine an Englishman, not even English

by race, from his youth up an inhabitant of great towns, attempting to delineate the English peasantry after a few weeks' stay in a Wiltshire village!

Balzac, on the other hand, a Frenchman of Frenchmen, was born in a French country town, was brought up in the country, and, what is more, was in the constant habit of retiring to out-of-the-way country inns and similar places to work. He had the key, to begin with; and he never let it get rusty. To some tastes and judgments his country sketches, if less lively, are more veracious even than his Parisian ones; they have less convention about them; they are less obviously under the dominion of prepossessions and crotchets, less elaborately calculated to form backgrounds and scenery for the evolutions of Rastignacs and Rubemprés.

The result is, in *Les Paysans*, a book of extraordinary interest and value. In one respect, indeed, it falls short of the highest kind of novel. There is no character in whose fortunes or in whose development we take the keenest interest. Blondet is little more than an intelligent chorus or reporter, though he does not tell the story; Montcornet is a good-natured 'old silly'; the Countess is—a Countess. Not one of the minor characters, not even Rigou, is very much more than a sketch. But then there is such a multitude of these sketches, and they are all instinct with such life and vigour! Although Balzac has used no illegitimate attractions—think only of the kind of stuff with which M. Zola, like a child smearing colour on a book-engraving, would have daubed the grisly outlines of the Tonsard family!—he has not shrunk from what even our modern realists, I suppose, would allow to be 'candour'; and his book is as

masterly as it is crushing in its indictment against the peasant.

Is the indictment as true as it is severe and well urged? I am rather afraid that we have not much farther to look than at certain parts of more than one of the Three Kingdoms to see that we need not even limit ourselves to the French peasant in admitting that it is. There are passages in the book which read as if they might be extracts *mutatis mutandis* from a novel on the Irish Land League or the Welsh Anti-Tithe Agitation. To a certain extent, no doubt, the English peasant, at least when he is not Celtic, is rather less bitten with actual 'land-hunger' than the Frenchman; and even when he is a Celt, it does not seem to be so much land-hunger proper as a dislike to adopting any other occupation which drives him to crime. Moreover, Free Trade and other things have made land in the United Kingdom very much less an object of positive greed than it was in France eighty years ago, or, indeed, than it is there still. Yet the main and special ingredients of a land agitation—the ruthless disregard of life, the indifference to all considerations of gratitude or justice, the secret-society alliance against the upper classes,—all these things are delineated here with an almost terrifying veracity.

For individual and separate sketches of scenes and characters (with the limitation above expressed) the book may vie almost with the best. The partly real, partly fictitious, otter-hunting of the old scoundrel Fourchon is quite first-rate; and it is of a kind rarely found in French writers till a time much more modern than Balzac's. The machinations of Gaubertin, Sibilet,

and Rigou are a little less vivid; but the latter is a masterly character of the second class, and perhaps the best type in fiction of the intelligent sensualist of the lower rank—of the man hard-headed, harder-hearted, and entirely destitute of any merit but shrewdness. The character of Bonnebault is a little, a very little, theatrical; the *troupier français* debauched, but not ungenerous, appears a little too much in his cartoon manner. 'La Péchina' wants fuller working out; but she affords one of the most interesting touches of the comparison above suggested in the scene between her, Nicolas, and Catherine. One turns a little squeamish at the mere thought of what M. Zola would have made of it in the effort to make clear to the lowest apprehension what Balzac, almost without offence, has made clear to all but the very lowest. Michal is good and not overdone; and of his enemies the Tonsards—enough has been said. They could not be better in their effectiveness; and, I am afraid, they could not be much better in their truth. Here, at least, if the moral picture is grimy enough, Balzac cannot, I think, be charged with having exaggerated it, while he cannot be denied the credit of having presented it in extraordinarily forcible and brilliant colours and outlines.

Les Paysans, owing to the lateness of its appearance, was less pulled about than almost any other of its author's books. It, or rather the first part of it, appeared under the title *Qui Terre a guerre a* in the *Presse* for December 1844. Nothing more appeared during the author's life; but in 1855 the *Revue de Paris* reprinted the previous portion, and finished the book, and the whole was published in four volumes by de Potter in the same year.

G. S.

THE PEASANTRY

To M. P.-S.-B. Gavault.

'I have seen the manners of my time, and I publish these letters,' wrote Jean Jacques Rousseau at the beginning of his Nouvelle Heloise; *can I not imitate that great writer and tell you that 'I am studying the tendencies of my epoch, and I publish this work'?*

So long as society inclines to exalt philanthropy into a principle instead of regarding it as an accessory, this Study will be terribly true to life. Its object is to set in relief the principal types of a class neglected by the throng of writers in quest of new subjects. This neglect, it may be, is simple prudence in days when the working classes have fallen heirs to the courtiers and flatterers of kings, when the criminal is the hero of romance, the headsman is sentimentally interesting, and we behold something like an apotheosis of the proletariat. Sects have arisen among us, every pen among them swells the chorus of 'Workers, arise!' even as once the Third Estate was bidden to 'Arise!' It is pretty plain that no Herostratus among them has had the courage to go forth into remote country districts to study the phenomena of a permanent conspiracy of those whom we call 'the weak' against those who imagine themselves to be 'the strong'—of the Peasantry against the Rich. All that can be done is to

open the eyes of the legislator, not of to-day, but of to-morrow. In the midst of an attack of democratic vertigo to which so many blind scribes have fallen victims, is it not imperatively necessary that some one should paint the portrait of this Peasant who stultifies the Code by reducing the ownership of land to a something that at once is and is not? Here you shall see this indefatigable sapper at his work, nibbling and gnawing the land into little bits, carving an acre into a hundred scraps, to be in turn divided, summoned to the banquet by the bourgeois, who finds in him a victim and ally. Here is a social dissolvent, created by the Revolution, that will end by swallowing up the bourgeoisie, which in its day devoured the old noblesse. Here is a Robespierre, with a single head and twenty million hands, whose very insignificance and obscurity has put him out of the reach of the law; a Robespierre always at his work, crouching in every commune, enthroned in town council chambers and bearing arms in the National Guard in every district in France, for in the year 1830 *France forgot that Napoleon preferred to run the risks of his misfortunes to the alternative of arming the masses.*

If during the past eight years I have a hundred times taken up and laid down the most considerable piece of work which I have undertaken; my friends, as you yourself, will understand that courage may well falter before such difficulties, and the mass of details essential to the development of a drama so cruelly bloodthirsty, but among the many reasons which induce something like temerity in me, count as one my desire to complete a work destined as a token of deep and lasting gratitude for a devotion which was one of my greatest consolations in misfortune. *De Balzac.*

BOOK I

He that hath the Land
Must fight for his own Hand.

I

THE CHÂTEAU

To M. Nathan.

'THE AIGUES,
'*August* 6, 1823.

'Now, my dear Nathan, purveyor of dreams to the public, I will set you dreaming of the actual, and you shall tell me if ever this century of ours can leave a legacy of such dreams to the Nathans and the Blondets of 1923. You shall measure the distance we have travelled since the time when the Florines of the eighteenth century awoke to find such a château as the Aigues in their contract.

'When you get my letter in the morning, dear friend of mine, from your bed will you see, fifty leagues away from Paris, by the side of the high road on the confines of Burgundy, a pair of red brick lodges separated or united by a green-painted barrier? There the coach deposited your friend.

'A quick-set hedge winds away on either side of the lodge gates; with trails of bramble like stray hairs escaping from it, and here and there an upstart sapling. Wild flowers grow along the top of the bank above the ditch bathed at their roots by the stagnant green water. To right and left the hedges extend as far as the coppice which skirts a double meadow, a bit of cleared forest no doubt.

'From the dusty deserted lodges at the gates there stretches a magnificent avenue of elm-trees, a century old; the spreading tops meet in a majestic green arched roof overhead, and the road below is so overgrown with grass that you can scarcely see the ruts. The old-world look of the gate, the venerable elm-trees, the breadth of the alleys on either side which cross the avenue, prepare you to expect an almost royal château. Before reaching the lodge I had had a look at the valley of the Aigues from the top of one of the slopes which we in France have the vanity to call a hill, just above the village of Conches, where we changed horses for the last stage. At the end the high road makes a détour to pass through the little sub-prefecture of Ville-aux-Fayes, where a nephew of our friend Lupeaulx lords it over the rural population. The higher slopes of the broad ridges above the river are crowned by the forest which stretches along the horizon line, and the whole picture is framed in the setting of the far-off hills of the Morvan—that miniature Switzerland. All this dense forest lies in three hands. It belongs partly to the Aigues, partly to the Marquis de Ronquerolles, partly to the Comte de Soulanges, whose country houses, parks, and villages, seen far down below in the valley, seem to be a realisation of 'Velvet' Breughel landscape fancies.

'If these details do not put you in mind of all the castles in Spain which you have longed to possess in France, this wonder-struck Parisian's traveller's tale is clean thrown away upon you. Briefly, I have delighted in a country where nature and art blend without spoiling each other, for nature here is an artist, and art looks like nature. I have found the oasis of which we have dreamed so often after reading certain romances; exuberant wildness subordinated to an effect, nature left to herself without confusion, and even with a suggestion of the wilderness, neglect, mystery; a certain character of its own. Over the barrier with you, and on we go.

'When with curious eyes I tried to look down the whole length of the avenue, which the sun only penetrates at sunrise and sunset, drawing zebra markings of shadow across it when the light is low, my view was cut short by the outline of a bit of rising ground. The avenue makes a détour to avoid it, and when you have turned the corner, the long row of trees is interrupted again by a little wood; you enter a square with a stone obelisk standing erect in the midst like an eternal note of admiration. Purple or yellow flowers (according to the time of year) droop from the courses of the masonry, and the monolith itself is surmounted (what a notion!) by a spiked ball. Clearly it was a woman who designed the Aigues, a man does not have such coquettish fancies. The architect acted upon instructions.

'Beyond the little wood, posted there like a sentinel, I came out into a delicious dip of the land, and crossed a foaming stream by a single span stone bridge covered with mosses of glorious hues, the daintiest of time's mosaics. Then the avenue ascends a gentle slope above the course of the stream, and in the distance you see the first set picture—a mill with its weir and causeway nestled among green trees. There was the thatched roof of the miller's house, the ducks and drying linen, the nets and tackle, and well-boat, to say nothing of the miller's lad, who had been gazing at me before I set eyes on him. Wherever you may be in the country, sure though you feel that you are quite alone, you are the cynosure of some pair of eyes under a cotton night-cap. Some labourer drops his hoe to look at you, some vine-dresser straightens his bent back, some little maid leaves her goats, or cows, or sheep, and scrambles up a willow tree to watch your movements.

'Before long the elm avenue becomes an alley, shaded by acacias, which brings you to a gate belonging to the period when wrought-iron was twisted into aërial filigree work, not unlike a writing-master's specimen flourishes;

this Avenue gate, as it is called, reveals the taste of the Grand Dauphin who built it; and if the golden arabesques are somewhat reddened now by the rust beneath, it seemed to me to be none the less picturesque on that account. On either side it is flanked by a porter's lodge, after the manner of the palace at Versailles, each surmounted by a colossal urn. A ha-ha fence, bristling with spikes most formidable to behold, extends for some distance on either side, and when the ha-ha ends a rough unplastered wall begins, a wall of motley-coloured stones of the strangest conceivable shapes, embedded in reddish-coloured mortar, the warm yellow of the flints blending with the white chalk and red-brown gritstone.

'At first sight the park looks sombre, for the walls are hidden by climbing plants, and the trees have not heard the sound of an axe for fifty years. You might think that it had become virgin forest again by some strange miracle known to woods alone. The plants that cling about the tree-trunks have bound them together. Glistening mistletoe-berries hang from every fork in the branches where the rain-water can lie. There I have found giant ivy-stems, and such growths as can only exist at a distance of fifty leagues from Paris, where land is not too dear to afford them ample room. It takes a good many square miles to make such a landscape as this. There is no sort of trimness about it, no sign of the garden rake. The ruts are full of water, where the frogs increase and multiply, and the tadpoles abide in peace; delicate forest flowers grow there, the heather is as fine as any that I have seen by the hearth in January in Florine's elaborate flower-stand. The mystery of the place mounts to your brain and stirs vague longings. The scent of the forest is adored by all lovers of poetry, for all things in it—the most harmless mosses, the deadliest lurking growths, damp earth, water-willows, and balm and wild thyme, and the yellow stars of the water-lilies, all the teeming vigorous growth of the forest

yields itself to me in the breath of the forest, and brings me the thought of them all, perhaps the soul of them all. I fell to thinking of a rose-coloured dress flitting along the winding alley.

'It ended abruptly at last in a little wood full of tremulous birches and poplars and their quivering kind, sensitive to the wind, slender-stemmed, graceful of growth, the trees of free love. And then, my dear fellow, I saw a sheet of water covered with pond-lilies, and a light nutshell of a boat, painted black and white, dainty as a Seine waterman's craft, lying rotting among the leaves of the water-plants, broad and spreading, or delicate and fine.

'Beyond the water rises the château, which bears the date 1560. It is a red brick building with stone facings, and string courses and angles all of stone. The casements (oh! Versailles) still keep their tiny square window panes. The stone of the string courses is cut into pyramids alternately raised and depressed, as on the Renaissance front of the Ducal Palace. The château is a straggling building, with the exception of the main body, which is approached by an imposing double stone staircase ascending in parallel lines and turning halfway up at right angles. The round balusters are flattened at the thickest part, and taper towards the bottom. To this main body various turrets have been added, covered with lead in floral designs, and modern wings with balconies and urns more or less in the Grecian style. There is no symmetry about it, my dear fellow. The buildings are dotted down quite promiscuously—nests sheltered, as it were, by a few trees. Their leafage scatters countless brown needles over the roof, a deposit of soil for the moss to grow in, filling the great rifts, which attract the eyes, with plant life. Here there is stone-pine, with rusty red bark and umbrella-shaped top, there a cedar a couple of centuries old, a spruce-fir, or weeping-willows, or an oak-tree rising above these, and

(in front of the principal turret) the most outlandish-looking shrubs, clipped yews to set you thinking of some old French pleasance long since swept away, and hortensias and magnolias at their feet; in fact, it is a sort of horticultural pensioner's hospital, where trees that have had their day linger on, forgotten like other heroes.

'A quaintly carved chimney at the house angle, puffing out volumes of smoke, assured me that this charming view was no scene on the stage. If there was a kitchen, human beings lived there. Can you imagine me, Blondet, the Parisian who thinks he has come to the Arctic regions when he finds himself at Saint-Cloud, set down in the midst of that torrid zone of Burgundian landscape? The sun beats down in scorching rays, the kingfisher keeps to the brink of the pool, the cicadas chirp, the grasshoppers cry, the seed-vessels of some plant crack here and there, the poppies distil their opiate in thick tears, everything stands out sharp and clear against the dark-blue sky. Joyous fumes of Nature's punch mount up from the reddish earth on the garden terraces; insects and flowers are drunk with the vapour that burns our faces and scorches our eyes. The grapes are rounding, the vines wearing a network of pale threads so fine that it puts laceworkers to the blush; and (a final touch) all along the terrace, in front of the house, blaze the blue larkspurs, nasturtiums the colour of flame, and sweet-peas. The scent of tuberose and orange blossoms comes from a distance. The forest fragrance which stirred my imagination prepared me for the pungent perfumes burning in this flower-seraglio.

'Then, at the head of the stone staircase, imagine a woman like a queen of flowers, a woman dressed in white, holding a sunshade lined with white silk above her bare head, a woman whiter than the silk, whiter than the lilies at her feet, or the starry jessamine thrusting itself up boldly through the balustrade before her; a

Frenchwoman born in Russia, who says, "I had quite given you up!" She had seen me ever since the turning in the path. How perfectly any woman, even the simplest of her sex, understands and adapts herself to a situation. The servants were busy preparing breakfast, evidently delayed till the diligence should arrive. She had not ventured to come to meet me.

'What is this but our dream? the dream of all lovers of Beauty in its many forms—beauty as of seraphs in a Luini's *Marriage of the Virgin* at Sarono, beauty that a Rubens discovers in the press of the fight in his *Battle of Thermodon*, beauty that five centuries have elaborated in the cathedrals of Milan and Seville, beauty of Saracen Granada, beauty of a Louis Quatorze's Versailles, beauty of the Alps—beauty of La Limagne?

'Here there is nothing overmuch of prince or financier, but prince of the blood and farmer-general have dwelt at the Aigues, or it would not include two thousand acres of woodland, a park nine hundred acres in extent, the mill, three little holdings, a large farm at Conches, and the vineyards belonging to the estate, which must bring in seventy-two thousand francs every year. Such is the Aigues, dear boy, whither I have come on an invitation of two years' standing, and here I write at this moment in the Blue Chamber—the room kept for intimate friends of the house.

'At the high end of the park there are a dozen springs of clear and limpid water from the Morvan, flowing in liquid ribbons down through the park in the valley, and through the magnificent gardens to pour into the pool. These have given the Aigues its name; Les Aigues-Vives, the living water, it used to be on old title-deeds, in contradistinction to Les Aigues-Mortes, the dead water, but *Vives* has been suppressed. The pool empties itself into the little river that crosses the avenue, through a narrow, willow-fringed channel. The effect of the channel thus decked is charming. As you glide along it in a boat,

you might fancy yourself in the nave of some vast cathedral, with the main body of the house at the further end of the channel to represent the choir; and if the sunset sheds its orange hues, barred with shadow, across the front of the château and lights up the panes, it seems to you that you see the fiery stained-glass windows. At the end of the channel you see Blangy, the principal village in the commune, which boasts some sixty houses and a country church; or, strictly speaking, this is simply an ordinary house in shocking repair, and distinguished from the rest by a wooden steeple roofed with broken tiles. A decent private house and a parsonage are likewise distinguishable.

'The commune is, for all that, a fairly large one. There are some two hundred scattered hearths in it, besides those in the little market town itself. There are fruit-trees along the wayside, and the land is cut up here and there into gardens, regular labourers' gardens, where everything is crowded into a little space, flowers, and onions, and cabbages, and vines, and gooseberry-bushes, and a great many dung-heaps. The village itself has an unsophisticated air; it looks rustic, with that very tidy simplicity which painters prize so highly. And further away, quite in the distance, you see the little town of Soulanges on the edge of a large sheet of water, like an imitation Lake of Thun.

'When you walk here in the park, with its four gates each in the grand style, you find your Arcadia of mythology grow flat as Beauce. The real Arcadia is in Burgundy, and not in Greece; Arcadia is the Aigues, and nowhere else. The little streams have united to make the river that winds along the lowest grounds of the park, hence the cool stillness peculiar to it, and the appearance of loneliness that puts you in mind of the Chartreuse, an idea carried out by a hermitage on an island contrived in the midst; without, it looks like a ruin in good earnest; within, its elegance is

worthy of the taste of the sybarite-financier who planned it.

'The Aigues, my dear fellow, once belonged to that Bouret who spent two millions on a single occasion when Louis XV. came here. How many stormy passions, distinguished intellects, and lucky circumstances have combined to make this beautiful place what it is. One of Henri IV.'s mistresses rebuilt the present château, and added the forest to the estate. Then the château was given to Mlle. Choin, a favourite of the Grand Dauphin, and she too enlarged the Aigues by several farms. Bouret fitted up the house with all the refinements of luxury to be found in the snug Parisian paradises of operatic celebrities. It was Bouret, too, who restored the ground-floor rooms in the style of Louis XV.

The dining-hall struck me dumb with wonder. Your eyes are attracted first to the fantastic arabesques of the ceiling, which is covered with frescoes in the Italian manner. Stucco women terminating in leafage bear baskets of fruit, from which the foliage of the ceiling springs. On the wall spaces between the figures some unknown artists painted wonderful designs, all the glories of the table; salmon, and boars' heads, and shell-fish, and every edible thing that by any strange freak of resemblance can recall the human form—man, woman, or child; for whimsicality of invention the designer might rival the Chinese, who, to my thinking, best understand decorative art. A spring is set under the table in the floor by the chair of the mistress of the house, so that she may touch the bell with her foot to summon the servants without interrupting the conversation or disturbing her pose. Paintings of voluptuous scenes are set above the doors. All the embrasures are of marble mosaic, and the hall is warmed from beneath. From every window there is a delicious view.

'The dining-hall communicates with a bathroom on the one hand, and a boudoir on the other. The bath-

room is lined with Sèvres tiles, painted in monochrome, after Boucher's designs; the floor is paved with mosaic; the bath itself with marble. In an alcove, screened by a painting on copper, raised by means of pulleys and a counterpoise, there is a couch of gilded wood in the very height of the Pompadour style. The lapis blue ceiling is spangled with golden stars. In this way the bath, the table, and the loves are brought together.

'Beyond the salon, in all the glory of the style of Louis XIV., is the splendid billiard-room. I do not know that it has its match in Paris. At the further end of the semicircular entrance-hall, the finest and daintiest of staircases, lighted from above, leads to the various suites of apartments, built in different centuries. And yet, my dear fellow, they cut off the heads of farmers-general in 1793! Good heavens! why cannot people understand that miracles of art are impossible without great fortunes and lordly lives of secure tranquillity. If the Opposition must needs put kings to death, they might leave us a few petty princes to keep up insignificant great state.

'At the present day these accumulated treasures are in the keeping of a little woman with an artist's temperament. Not content with restoring the place on a large scale, she makes a labour of love of their custody. Philosophers, falsely so called, who are wholly taken up with themselves, while apparently interested in Humanity, call these pretty things extravagances. They will swoon away before a spinning-jenny, and wax faint with bliss over tiresome modern industrial inventions, as if we of to-day were any greater or any happier than they of the time of Henri IV., of Louis XIV., or Louis XVI., who set their seal upon this château of the Aigues. What palace, what royal château, what houses, or works of art, or golden brocaded stuffs, shall *we* leave behind us? We rummage out our grandmothers' petticoats to cover our armchairs. Like knavish and selfish life-tenants, we

pull everything down that we may plant cabbages where marvellous palaces stood. But yesterday the plough went over the domain of Persan, whence one of the richest families of the Parliament of Paris took its name; Montmorency has fallen under the hammer—Montmorency, on which one of the Italians about Napoleon spent incredible sums; then there is Le Val, the work of Regnaud de Saint-Jean-d'Angély; and Cassan, built by the mistress of a Prince of Conti; four royal dwelling-places in all destroyed quite lately in the valley of the Oise alone. We are making ready a Roman Campagna about Paris for the morrow of a coming sack, when the storm-wind from the North shall blow upon our plaster villas and pasteboard ornaments and . . .

'Now, just see, my dear fellow, what comes of the habit of writing journalists' padding. Here am I, rounding off a sort of article for you. Can it be that the mind, like a highway, has its ruts? I will pull myself up at once, for I am robbing them at the office, and robbing myself, and, probably, to make you yawn. There goes the second bell for one of those abundant breakfasts, long fallen into disuse, in the ordinary way, of course, in Parisian houses. You shall have the rest of this to-morrow.

'Now for the history of my Arcadia. In 1815 there died at the Aigues one of the most celebrated *impures* of last century, an opera singer, overlooked by the guillotine, and forgotten by the aristocracy, literature, and finance; intimate as she had been with finance, literature, and the aristocracy, and on a bowing acquaintance with the guillotine, she had fallen into neglect, like many charming old ladies, who expiate the triumphs of youth in the country, and take a new love for a lost love, nature replacing human nature. Such women live with the flowers, the scent of the woods, the open sky, and the light of the sun, with everything that sings, or flutters, or shines, or springs from the earth; birds, or lizards, or

blossoms, or grass. They know nothing about these things; they do not seek to explain it, but they have a capacity for loving left in age; and so well do they love, that dukes and marshals, old jealousies and bickerings, and farmer-generals, and their follies and luxurious extravagance, and paste gems and diamonds, and rouge and high-heeled pantofles, are all forgotten for the sweets of a country life.

'I am in the possession of valuable information which throws a light on Mlle. Laguerre's later life; for I have felt rather uncomfortable now and again about the old age of such as Florine, and Mariette, and Suzanne du Val-Noble, and Tullia, just like any child who puzzles his wits to know where all the old moons go.

'Mlle. Laguerre took fright in 1790 at the turn things were taking, and came to settle down at the Aigues, which Bouret had bought for her (he spent several summers here with her). The fate of the du Barry put her in such a quaking that she buried her diamonds. She was only fifty-three years old at the time, and, according to her woman (who has married a gendarme here, a Mme. Soudry, whom they call *Mme. la Mairesse*, a piece of brazen-fronted flattery), "Madame was handsomer than ever." Nature, my dear fellow, has her reasons for what she does, no doubt, when she treats these creatures as pet children; debauchery does not kill them; on the contrary, they thrive, and flourish, and renew their youth upon it; lymphatic though they look, they have nerves which sustain their marvellous framework, and bloom perennially from a cause which would make a virtuous woman hideous. Decidedly, Fate is not a moral agent.

'Mlle. Laguerre's life here was above reproach, nay, might it not almost be classed with the Lives of the Saints, after that famous adventure of hers? One evening, driven distracted by hopeless love, she fled from the Opera in her stage costume, and spent the night in

weeping by the roadside out in the fields (how we have slandered love in the time of Louis xv. !). The dawn was so unwonted a sight to her, that she sang her sweetest airs to greet it. Some peasants gathered about her, attracted as much by her pose as by her tinsel fripperies, and amazed by her gestures, her beauty, and her singing, they one and all took her for an angel, and fell upon their knees. But for Voltaire, there would have been another miracle at Bagnolet.

'I know not whether Heaven will give much credit to this sinner for her tardy virtue, for a life of pleasure becomes loathsome to one so palled with pleasure as a wanton of the stage of the time of Louis xv. Mlle. Laguerre was born in 1740. She was in the full bloom of her beauty in 1760, when they nicknamed M. de —— (the name escapes me) *Ministre de la guerre*, on account of his *liaison* with her.

'She changed her name, which was quite unknown in the country, called herself Mme. des Aigues, the better to bury herself in the district, and amused herself by keeping up her estate with extremely artistic taste. When Bonaparte became First Consul, she rounded off her property with some of the Church lands, selling her diamonds to buy them ; and as an opera-girl is scarcely fitted to shine in the management of estates, she left the land to her steward, and devoted her personal attention to her park, her fruit-trees, and her flower-garden.

'Mademoiselle being dead and buried at Blangy, the notary from Soulanges (the little place between Ville-aux-Fayes and Blangy) made an exhaustive inventory, and in course of time discovered the famous singer's next-of-kin ; she herself knew nothing about them ; but eleven families, poor agricultural labourers, living near Amiens, lay down in rags one night, and woke up next morning in sheets of gold.

'The Aigues had to be sold, of course, and Montcornet bought it. In various posts in Spain and Pomerania he

had managed to save the requisite amount, something like eleven hundred thousand francs. The furniture was included in the purchase. It seems as if the fine place must always belong to some one in the War Department. Doubtless, the General was not insensible to the luxurious influences of his ground-floor apartments, and in talking to the Countess yesterday I insisted that the Aigues had determined his marriage.

'If you are to appreciate the Countess, my dear fellow, you must know that the General is choleric in temper, sanguine in complexion, and stands five feet nine inches; is round as a barrel, bull-necked, and the owner of a pair of shoulders for which a smith might forge a model cuirass. Montcornet commanded a company of Cuirassiers at Essling (called by the Austrians Gross-Aspern), and did not lose his life when his magnificent cavalry was pushed back into the Danube. Man and horse managed to cross the river on a huge beam of wood. The Cuirassiers, finding that the bridge was broken, turned like heroes when Montcornet gave the word, and stood their ground against the whole Austrian army. They took up more than thirty cartloads of cuirasses next day on the field, and among themselves the Germans coined a special nickname for the Cuirassiers—those "men of iron."[1]

[1] I set my face on principle against footnotes; but the present one, the first which I have permitted myself, may be excused on the score of its historical interest. It will show, moreover, that battle scenes have yet to be described in other than the dry technical language of military writers, who, for three thousand years, can speak of nothing but right wings, left wings, and centres more or less routed, but say not a word of the soldier, his heroism, and his hardships. The conscientious manner in which I am setting about the *Scènes de la vie militaire* has meant a series of visits to every battlefield at home or abroad watered by French blood, so I determined to see the field of Wagram. As I reached the bank of the Danube opposite Lobau, I noticed ribbed marks under the soft grass, something like the furrows in a field of luzern, and asked the peasant, our guide, about this new system of agriculture (for so I took it to be). 'That is where the Cuirassiers of the Imperial Guard are lying,' he said; 'they are buried under those mounds that you see.' The words sent a shiver through me; and Prince Friedrich von Schwartzenberg, who interpreted them, added that this very peasant had

'Montcornet looks like a hero of ancient times. He has strong muscular arms, a broad resonant chest, a head striking from its leonine character, and a voice that can sound the command to "Charge!" above the din of battle; but his is the courage of a sanguine temperament—unreasoning and uncalculating. Montcornet is an awe-inspiring figure at first sight, like many another general whom the soldier's common-sense, the wariness of a man who continually takes his life in his hand, and the habit of command seemingly raise above other men. You take him for a Titan, but he harbours a dwarf in him, like the pasteboard giant who greeted Queen Elizabeth at the gate of Kenilworth Castle. Choleric and kind, full of the pride of the Empire, he has the caustic tongue

driven the train of carts full of the cuirasses of the dead, and that by one of the grotesque accidents of war it was the same man who prepared Napoleon's breakfast on the morning of the battle. Poor though he was, he had kept the double napoleon which the Emperor had given him for his eggs and milk. The curé of Gross-Aspern showed us over the famous cemetery where Frenchmen and Austrians fought in blood halfway to the knee with courage equally obstinate and equally splendid on either side. But there was a marble tablet in the place on which we concentrated our whole attention, the curé explaining how that it was erected to the memory of the owner of Gross-Aspern, killed on the third day of the fight, and that it was the only return made to the family. Then he said, with deep sadness in his tones, 'That was a time of great misery; a time of great promises; but now to-day is the day of forgetfulness. . . .' The words seemed to me to be grandly simple; but when I had thought the matter over, the apparent ingratitude of the House of Austria seemed to me to be justifiable. Neither peoples nor kings are rich enough to reward all the devotion shown in the hour of supreme struggle. Let those who serve a cause with a lurking thought of reward set a price on their blood, and turn *condottieri*! Those who handle sword or pen for their country should think of nothing but how to 'play the man,' as our forefathers used to say, and accept nothing, not even glory itself, save as a lucky accident.

Three times they stormed that famous cemetery; the third time Masséna made his famous address to his men from the coach-body in which they carried the wounded hero, 'You've five sous a day, you blackguards, and I've forty millions, and you let me go in front!' Every one knows the order of the day that the Emperor sent to his lieutenant by M. de Sainte-Croix, who swam the Danube three times, 'Die, or take the village again; the existence of the Army is at stake! The bridges are broken.'—THE AUTHOR.

of a soldier, quick with a word, quicker still with a blow. The man who made so grand a figure on the battlefield becomes unbearable in domestic life, all his ideas of love were learned in the camp, his is that soldiers' love for whom the ancients (ingenious makers of myths) discovered a tutelary deity in Eros—offspring of Mars and Venus. Those delicious religious chroniclers admit half a score of different Loves. Make a study of the paternity and attributes of each, and you will provide yourself with a social nomenclature of the completest kind. We imagine that we invent this or that, do we?—When the globe, like a dreaming sick man, turns again through another cycle, and our continents become oceans, the Frenchman of the coming time will find a steam-engine, a cannon, a copy of a daily paper, and a charter, lying wrapped about with weeds at the bottom of our present Atlantic.

'Now, the Countess, my dear boy, is a little woman, fragile and delicate and timid. What say you to this marriage? Any one who knows the world, knows that this sort of thing happens so often that a well-assorted marriage is an exception. I came here to see how this tiny slender woman holds the leading strings; for she has this huge, tall, square-built General of hers quite as well in hand as ever he kept his Cuirassiers.

'If Montcornet raises his voice before his Virginie, Madame lays her finger on her lips, and he holds his tongue. The old soldier goes to smoke his pipe or cigar in a summer-house fifty paces away from the château, and perfumes himself before he comes back. He is proud of his subjection. If anything is suggested, he turns to her, like a bear infatuated for grapes, with "That is as Madame pleases." He comes to his wife's room, the paved floor creaking like boards under his heavy tread; and if she cries in a startled voice, "Do not come in!" he describes a right wheel in military fashion, meekly remarking, "You will let me know when I may come and speak to you . . ." and this from the voice that

roared to his Cuirassiers on the banks of the Danube, "Boys, there is nothing for it but to die, and to die handsomely, since there is nothing else to be done!" A touching little thing I once heard him say of his wife, "I not only love her, I reverence her." Sometimes, in one of his fits of rage, when his wrath knows no bounds, and pours out in torrents that carry all before it, the little woman goes to her room and leaves him to storm. But four or five days later she will say, "Don't put yourself in a passion, you will break a blood-vessel on your lungs, to say nothing of the pain it gives me," and the Lion of Essling takes to flight to dry the tears in his eyes. If he comes into the salon when we are deep in conversation, "Leave us," she says, "he is reading something to me," and the General goes.

'None but strong men, great-natured and hot-tempered, among these thunderbolts of battle, diplomates with Olympian brows and men of genius, are capable of these courses of confidence, of generosity for weakness, of constant protection and love without jealousy, of this *bonhomie* with a woman. Faith! I rate the Countess's science as far above crabbed and peevish virtues as the satin of a settee above the Utrecht velvet of a dingy back parlour sofa.

'Six days have I spent in this admirable country, dear fellow, and I am not tired yet of admiring the wonders of this park land with the dark forests rising above it, and the paths beside the streams. Everything here fascinates me—Nature, and the stillness of Nature, quiet enjoyment, the easy life which Nature offers. Ah! here is real literature, there are never defects of style in a meadow; and complete happiness would be complete forgetfulness even of the *Débats*.

'You ought not to need to be told that we have had two wet mornings. While the Countess slept, and Montcornet tramped over his property, driven to keep the promise so rashly given, I have been writing to you.

'Hitherto, though I was born in Alençon, the son of an old justice and a prefect (if what they tell me is true), though I am something of a judge of grass land, I had heard of such things as estates that brought in four or five thousand francs a month, but I regarded these as idle tales. Money, for me, has but four hideous convertible terms—work, booksellers, journalism, and politics. When shall *we* have an estate where money grows out of the earth, in some pretty place in the country. That is what I wish you in the name of the theatre, the press, and literature. Amen!

'How Florine will envy the lamented Mlle. Laguerre! Our modern Bourets have lost the old French lordly instinct which taught them how to live; they will club three together to take a box at the Opera, and go shares in a pleasure; no longer do they cut down magnificently bound quartos to match the octavos on their shelves. It is as much as they will do to buy a book in paper-covers. What are we coming to? Good-bye, children; keep your benign Blondet in loving remembrance.'

If this letter, which dropped from the idlest pen in France, had not been preserved by a miraculous chance, it would be all but impossible now to describe the Aigues as it used to be, and without this description the twice tragical tale of the events which took place there would perhaps be less interesting.

Plenty of people expect, no doubt, to see the General's cuirass lighted up by a lightning flash, to see his wrath kindled, his fury descend like a waterspout on this little woman, in fact, to find the usual curtain scene of modern drama—a tragedy in a bedroom. How should this modern tragedy develop itself in the pretty salon beyond the bluish enamelled doorways, garrulous with mythological loves? Strange bright birds were painted over the ceiling and the shutters; china monsters were splitting their sides with laughter on the mantel-shelf; the blue dragons

played on the rich vases, twisting their tails in spiral scrolls along the rim which some Japanese artist enamelled with a maze of colour to please his fancy, and the very chairs, lounges, sofas, console tables, and stands dwelt in an atmosphere of contemplative idleness enervating to body and mind. No; this tragedy extends beyond the sphere of domestic life, it is played out upon a higher or a lower stage. Do not look for passion here; the bare truth will be only too dramatic. And the historian moreover should never forget that it is his duty to allot to each his part; that the rich and the poor are equal before his pen; and for him the figure of the peasant has the greatness of his miseries, the rich man the pettiness of his absurdities. After all, the rich have passions, the peasant knows nothing beyond natural cravings, and therefore the peasant's lot is doubly poor; and if it is a political necessity that his aggressions should be sternly checked, from a human and religious point of view he should be treated reverently.

II

A BUCOLIC OVERLOOKED BY VIRGIL.

When a Parisian drops down into some country place, and finds himself cut off from all his accustomed ways, he soon finds time hang heavily on his hands in spite of the utmost ingenuity on the part of his entertainers. Indeed, your host and hostess being aware that the pleasures of a *tête-à-tête* (by nature fugitive) cannot endure for ever, will tell you placidly that 'you will find it very dull here'; and, in fact, any one who wishes to know the delights of a life in the country must have some interest to keep him in the country, must know its toils and the alternations of pain and pleasure that make up harmony—the eternal symbol of human life.

When the visitor has recovered from the effects of the journey, made up arrears of slumber, and has fallen in with country ways of life, a Parisian who is neither a sportsman nor a farmer, and wears thin walking shoes, is apt to discover that the early morning hours pass slowest of all. The women are still asleep or at their toilettes, and invisible until breakfast time; the master of the house went out early to see after his affairs; and from eight o'clock till eleven therefore (for in nearly all châteaux they breakfast at that hour) a Parisian is left to his own society. He seeks amusement in the small details of his toilet, a short-lived expedient; and unless a man of letters has brought down with him some bit of work (which he finds impossible to do, and takes back to town untouched, and with no added knowledge of it save of the difficulties at the outset), he is reduced to pace the alleys in the park, to gape and gaze and count the tree trunks. The easier a life is, the more irksome it grows, unless you happen to belong to the Shaker community, or to the worshipful company of carpenters or bird-stuffers.

If, like the landowners, you were to remain in the country for the rest of your days, you would provide your tedium with some hobby—geological, mineralogical, botanical, or what not; but no sensible man will contract a vice that may last through his life for the sake of killing time for a fortnight. The most magnificent country-house soon becomes wearisome to those who own nothing of it but the view; the beauties of nature seem very paltry compared with the theatrical representations of them, and Parisian life sparkles from every facet. If a man is not under the particular spell which keeps him attached (like Blondet) to spots honoured by *her* footsteps and lighted by *her* eyes, he is fit to envy the birds their wings, that so he may return to the ceaseless and thrilling dramatic spectacle of Paris, and its harrowing struggles for existence.

From the length of the journalist's letter, any shrewd observer should guess that the writer had mentally and physically reached that peculiar phase of repletion consequent on satisfied desire and glut of happiness, which is perfectly illustrated by the state of the domestic fowl, when, fattened by force, with head declining upon a too protuberant crop, the victim stands planted on both feet, unable and unwilling to give so much as a glance to the most tempting morsel. When, therefore, Blondet had finished his formidable letter, he felt a longing to go beyond the bounds of this Armida's Garden, to find anything to enliven the deadly dulness of the early hours of the day, for between breakfast and dinner he spent his time with his hostess, who knew how to make it pass quickly.

Mme. de Montcornet had kept a clever man a whole month in the country, and had not seen the feigned smile of satiety on his face, nor detected the incipient yawn of boredom which can never be concealed. This is one of a woman's greatest triumphs. An affection proof against such tests should last for ever. Why women do not put their lovers on a trial which neither fool nor egoist nor narrow nature can abide, is utterly incomprehensible. Philip II. himself, that Alexander of dissimulation, would have begun to blab his secrets after a month's *tête-à-tête* in the country. For which reason, kings spend their lives in a perpetual bustle and racket, and never allow anybody to see them for more than a quarter of an hour at a time.

Yet notwithstanding the delicate attentions of one of the most charming women in Paris, Émile Blondet played truant with a relish long forgotten. The day when his letter was finished he told François (the head servant, specially appointed to wait upon him) to call him early. He had made up his mind to explore the valley of the Avonne.

The Avonne at its head is a small river. Many

streams that rise round about the Aigues go to swell it below Conches, and at Ville-aux-Fayes it joins one of the largest affluents of the Seine. The Avonne is navigable for rafts for four leagues; Jean Rouvet's invention has given all their commercial value to the forests of Aigues, Soulanges, and Ronquerolles, on the heights above the picturesque river. The park of the Aigues takes up most of the valley between the river that flows below the wooded heights on either side, called the Forest of the Aigues, and the king's highway, mapped out on the horizon by a line of old warped elm-trees running parallel with the hills (so called) of the Avonne, the lowest steps of the grand amphitheatre of the Morvan.

To use a homely metaphor, the shape of the park was something like a huge fish lying in the valley bottom, with the head at Conches and the tail at Blangy, the length much exceeding the breadth, and the broadest part in the middle full five times the width of the valley at Blangy, or six times the width at Conches. Possibly the lie of the land, thus set among three villages (Soulanges, whence you plunge down into this Eden, being but a league away), may have assisted to foment discord, and suggested the excesses which form the chief subject of this *Scène*; for if passing travellers look down on the paradise of the Aigues from Ville-aux-Fayes with envious eyes, how should the well-to-do townsfolk of Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes feel less covetous when they behold it every day of their lives?

This last bit of topographical detail is needed if the position is to be understood, as well as the why and wherefore of four park gates at the Aigues; for the whole park was shut in by walls, save where a ha-ha fence had been substituted for the sake of the view. The four gates, called respectively the Conches gate, the Avonne, the Avenue, and Blangy gates, were so full of the character of the different times in which they

were built, that they shall be described in their place for the benefit of archæologists; but the subject shall receive the concise treatment which Blondet gave to the avenue itself.

For a week the illustrious editor of the *Journal des Débats* had taken his walks abroad with the Countess, till he knew by heart the Chinese pavilion, bridges, islands, kiosks, hermitage, chalet, ruined temple, Babylonish ice-house; in short, all the ins and outs of the gardens planned by an architect with nine hundred acres at his disposal. Now, therefore, he felt inclined to trace the course of the Avonne, which his host and hostess daily praised to him. Every evening he had planned the excursion, every morning he forgot all about it. And, indeed, above the park the Avonne is like an Alpine torrent, hollowing out its rocky bed, and fashioning deep pools, where it sinks underground. Here and there there is a waterfall, when some little stream unexpectedly splashes into it; here and there it broadens out like a miniature Loire, and ripples over sandy shallows, but it is a stream so changeful in its moods that rafts are out of the question. Blondet struck up through the park by the shortest way to the Conches gate, which deserves a few words of description, if only for the sake of the historical associations connected with the property.

The founder of the Aigues was a cadet of the house of Soulanges, who married an heiress, and was minded to snap his fingers at his oldest brother, an amiable sentiment to which we also owe the Isola-Bella, the fairyland on Lake Maggiore. In the middle ages the castle of the Aigues stood beside the Avonne; but of the whole stronghold only one gateway remained, a porched gateway of the kind usual in fortified towns, with a pepperbox turret on either side of it. The ponderous masonry above the arch was gay with wallflowers, and pierced by three great mullion windows. A spiral staircase had

been contrived to give access to two dwelling-rooms in the first turret, and to a kitchen in the second. On the roof ridge of the porch, steep pitched, like all such constructions in the olden time, stood a couple of weather-cocks, adorned with quaint ironwork. Not many places can boast of a townhall so imposing.

The scutcheon of the Soulanges family was still visible on the keystone of the arch of a hard stone selected for its purpose by the craftsman whose chisel had engraven the arms of Soulanges—*azure, three palmer's staves per pale argent, five crosslets fitchy sable on a fess gules over all*, differenced by a mark of cadency. Blondet spelt out the device *Je soule agir*—It is my wont to act—a bit of word play such as crusaders loved to make on their names, and an excellent maxim which Montcornet to his sorrow neglected, as shall be seen. The heavy old wooden door was heavier yet by reason of the iron studs arranged in groups of five upon it. A pretty girl opened it for Blondet; and a keeper, awakened by the groaning of the hinges, put his head out of the window. The man was in his night-shirt.

'What is this? Our keepers are still abed at this time of day, are they?' thought the Parisian, who imagined that he knew all about forest customs.

With a quarter of an hour's walk he reached the springs of the river, and from the upper end of the valley at Conches the whole enchanting view lay before his eyes. A description of that landscape, like the history of France, might fill a thousand volumes, or could be condensed into a single book. Let a couple of phrases suffice.

Picture a bulging mass of rock, covered with the velvet of dwarf shrubs, placed so that it looks like some huge tortoise set across the Avonne which wears its way out at the foot, a rock that describes an arch through which you behold a little sheet of water, clear as a mirror, where Avonne seems to sleep before it breaks in

waterfalls over the huge boulders where the dwarf willows, supple as springs, perpetually yield to the force of the current, only to fly back again.

Up above the waterfalls the hillsides are cut sharply away, like some Rhineland crag clad with mosses and heather; they are rifted, too, like the Rhine crag by strata of schist, where springs of white water bubble out here and there, each one above a little space of grass, always fresh and green, which serves as a cup for the spring; and finally, by way of contrast to the wild solitude of nature, you see the outposts of civilisation: Conches, and the gardens on the edge of the fields, and beyond the picturesque wilderness the assembled roofs of the village and the church spire.

Behold the two phrases! But the sunrise, the pure air, the dew crystals, the blended music of woods and water, these must be divined!

'Faith, it is nearly as fine as the Opera!' said Blondet to himself, as he clambered up the torrent bed of the Avonne. The caprices of the higher stream brought out all the depth, stillness, and straightness of the Avonne in the valley, shut in by tall trees and the Forest of the Aigues. He did not, however, pursue his morning walk very far. He was soon brought to a stand by a peasant, one of the subordinate characters so necessary to the action of this drama that it is doubtful whether they or the principal characters play the more important parts.

Blondet, that clever writer, reached a boulder-strewn spot, where the main stream was pent as if between two doors, when he saw the man standing so motionless that his journalist's curiosity would have been aroused, even if the figure and clothing of the living statue had not already puzzled him not a little.

In that poverty-stricken figure he saw an old man such as Charlet loved to draw; the strongly-built frame, schooled to endure hardship, might have belonged to

one of the troopers depicted by the soldier's Homer; the rugged purplish-red countenance gave him kinship with Charlet's immortal scavengers, unschooled by resignation. An almost bald head was protected from the inclemency of the weather by a coarse felt hat, the brim stitched to the crown here and there, and from under the hat one or two locks of hair straggled out; an artist would have given four francs an hour for the chance of studying from the life that dazzling snow, arranged after the fashion of the Eternal Father of classic art. Yet there was something in the way in which the cheeks sank in, continuing the lines of the mouth, that plainly said that this toothless old person went more often to the barrel than to the bread-hutch. The short white bristles of a scanty beard gave an expression of menace to his face. A pair of little eyes, oblique as a pig's, and too small for his huge countenance, suggested a combination of sloth and cunning; but at that moment, as he pored upon the river, fire seemed to flash from them.

For all clothing the poor man wore a blouse, which had been blue in former times, and a pair of trousers of the coarse canvas that they use in Paris for packing material. Any town-dweller would have shuddered at the sight of his broken sabots, without so much as a little straw by way of padding in the cracks. As for the blouse and trousers, they had reached the stage when a textile fabric is fit for nothing but the pulping trough of a paper-mill.

Blondet, as he gazed at the rustic Diogenes, was convinced that the typical peasant of old tapestry, old pictures, and carvings was not, as he had hitherto imagined, a purely fancy portrait. Nor did he utterly condemn, as heretofore, the productions of the School of Ugliness; he began to see that in man the beautiful is but a gratifying exception to a general rule, a chimerical vision in which he struggles to believe.

'I wonder what the ideas and manner of life of such a

human being may be! What is he thinking about?' Blondet asked himself, and curiosity seized upon him. 'Is that my fellow man? We have only our human shape in common, and yet——'

He looked at the hard tissues peculiar to those who lead an out-of-door life, accustomed to all weathers, and to excessive heat and cold, and to hardships, in fact, of every kind, a training which turns the skin to something like tanned leather, and makes the sinews well nigh pain-proof, like those of the Arabs or Cossacks.

'That is one of Fenimore Cooper's Redskins,' said Blondet to himself; 'there is no need to go to America to study the savage.'

The Parisian was not two paces away, but the old man did not look round; he stood and stared at the opposite bank with the fixity that glazes a Hindoo fakir's eyes and induces anchylosis of every joint. This kind of magnetism is more infectious than people think; it was too much for Blondet, he too began at last to stare into the water.

A good quarter of an hour went by in this way, and Blondet still found no sufficient motive for the proceeding. 'Well, my good man,' he asked, 'what is there over yonder?'

'Hush-sh!' the other said, with a sign to Blondet that he must not disturb the air with his voice. 'You will scare her——'

'Who?'

'An otter, mister. If her hears us, her's just the one to give us the slip and get away under water. There ain't no need to say that her jumped in there. There! Do you see the water a-bubbling up? Oh, her's lying in wait for a fish; but when her tries to come out, my boy will catch hold of her. It's like this, you see, an otter is the rarest thing. It is a scientific animal to catch, fine and delicate eating, all the same; they will give me ten francs for it at the Aigues, seeing as the

lady there doesn't eat meat of a Friday, and to-morrow is Friday. Time was when the lady that's dead and gone has paid me as much as twenty francs for one, and her would let me have the skin back too!—Mouche,' he called in a loud whisper, 'keep a good look out——'

On the other side of this branch stream of the Avonne, Blondet saw a pair of eyes gleaming like a cat's eyes from under a clump of alders; then he made out the brown forehead and shock head of a boy of twelve or thereabouts, who was lying there flat on his stomach; the urchin pointed out the otter, with a sign which indicated that he was keeping the animal in view. The consuming anxiety of the old man and the child got the better of Blondet; he fell a willing victim to the devouring demon of Sport.

Now that demon has two claws, called Hope and Curiosity, by which he leads you whither he will.

'You sell the skin to the hatters,' the old man went on. 'So fine it is and soft. They make caps of it——'

'Do you believe that, my good man?'

'Of course, mister, you ought to know a lot more about it than I do, for all I am seventy years old,' said the old person meekly and respectfully; then, with unctuous insinuation—'and you can tell me, no doubt, why coach-guards and innkeepers think such a lot of it, sir?'

Blondet, that master of irony, had his suspicions; the word 'scientific' had not escaped him; he remembered the Maréchal de Richelieu, and fancied that this old rustic was laughing at him, but the simplicity of the man's manner and stupid expression dismissed the idea.

'There were plenty of otters to be seen hereabouts when I was young, the country suits them,' the good soul went on; 'but they have hunted them down so much, that if we see a tail of one on 'em once in seven years, it is the most you will do. There's the *sub-perfect* over at Ville-aux-Fayes—you know him, mister?—He is a nice young man, like you, for all he is a Parisian,

and he is fond of curiosities. So, knowing that I was good at catching otters, for I know them as well as ever you know your alphabet, he just says to me like this, "Father Fourchon, when you find an otter, you bring it to me," says he, "and I'll pay you well for it; and if her should have white dots on her back," he says, "I would give you thirty francs for her." That's what he says to me on the quay at Ville-aux-Fayes, and that's the truth; true as I believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. There is another learned man over at Soulanges, M. Gourdon, our doctor he is, they say he is making a cabinet of natural history; there is not his like in Dijon, he is the learnedest man in these parts in fact, and he would give me a good price for her! He knows how to stuff man and beast! And there's my boy here stands me out that this one is white *all over*!—"If that is so," I says to him, "the Lord A'mighty have borne us in mind this morning!" Look at the water a-bubbling, do you see?—Oh! her's there.—Her lives in a kind of a burrow on land, but for all that, her'll stop under water whole days together.—Ah! her heard you, mister, her is suspicious, for there ain't no animile cleverer than that one; her is worse than a woman.'

'Perhaps that is why the otter is called *her*,' suggested Blondet.

'Lord, mister, being from Paris as you are, you know better about it than we do. But you would have done us a better turn by lying a-bed of a morning, because—do you see that ripple-like over yonder?—Her's getting away underneath. . . . Come along, Mouche! Her has heard the gentleman, her has, and her is just the one to keep us here cooling our heels till midnight; let us be going.—There's our thirty francs swimming away.'

Mouche got up, but wistfully. He was a touzle-headed youth, with a brown face, like an angel's in some fifteenth century picture. To all intents and purposes, he wore breeches, for his trousers ended at the knee in a

jagged fringe ornamented with thorns and dead leaves. This indispensable garment was secured to his person by a couple of strands of tow by way of braces, and a shirt of sacking (originally of the same pattern as his grandsire's trousers, but thickened by raw-edged patches) left a sunburned chest exposed to view. In the matter of simplicity Mouche's clothes marked a distinct advance on old Fourchon's costume.

'What good, simple souls they are out here!' said Blondet to himself. 'Round about Paris the work-people would cut up rough if a swell came and spoiled sport.' And as he had never set eyes on an otter, not even in the Museum, he was quite delighted with this episode in his walk.

'Come, now,' he began, feeling touched, for the old man was going away without asking for anything, 'you say that you are an expert otter-hunter.—If you are sure that the otter is there——'

Mouche, on the opposite bank, pointed to the air-bubbles rising to the surface of the Avonne, to die away in eddies in the middle of the pool.

'Her has gone back again,' said old Fourchon; 'her has been to draw a breath of air, the slut! It is her as has made that fuss there. How do her manage to breathe under water? But the thing's so cunning, it laughs at science.'

'Very well,' said Blondet, deciding that the last pleasantry was a current bucolic witticism, and no product of the brain of the individual before him; 'stop and catch the otter.'

'And how about our day's work, mine and Mouche's?'

'What is a day's work?'

'For the two of us, me and my apprentice? . . . Five francs——' said the old man, looking Blondet in the eyes with a hesitation which plainly said that this was a prodigious overstatement.

The journalist took some coins from his pocket, saying, 'Here are ten francs for you, and you shall have at least as much again for the otter.'

'Her'll be cheap to you at that, if her has white dots on her back, for the *sub-perfect* told me that our museum has only one of that sort.—And he knows a good deal, all the same, does our *sub-perfect*, he is no fool. If I go after otters, Master des Lupeaulx is after Master Gaubertin's daughter, who has a fine white *dot* on her back.—Stay, mister, no offence to you, but you go and beat up the water by that stone yonder in the Avonne. When we have driven out the otter, her will come down with the stream, for that is a trick the animals have; them'll go up stream to fish, and when they have as much as they can carry, they come down to their burrow; they know it's easier going down stream. Didn't I tell you that they are cunning! If I had learned cunning in their school, I should be living like a gentleman at this day. I found out too late that you have to get up early in the morning to make headway up stream and get the first chance at the booty. There was a spell cast over me when I was born, in fact. Perhaps the three of us together will be too clever for the otter.'

'And how, old necromancer?'

'Lord, sir, we peasants are such stupid animals ourselves, that we come at last to understand the animals. This is what we will do. When the otter turns to go home, we will scare her here, and you will scare her there, and scared of both sides, her'll make a dash for the bank. If her takes to the land, it is all over with her. The thing can't walk, it's made to swim, with its goose-feet. Oh! you will have some fun, for it is a regular double game—you fish and hunt at the same time. The General at the Aigues, where you are staying, came back three times running, he took such a fancy to the sport.'

Blondet obediently hopped from stone to stone till he

reached the middle of the Avonne, where he took his stand, duly provided with a green branch, which the old otter-hunter cut for him, ready to whip the stream at the word of command.

'Yes, just there, mister,' and there Blondet remained, unconscious of the flight of time, for every moment the old man's gestures kept him on the lookout for a successful issue, and time never passes more quickly than when every faculty is on the alert in expectation of energetic action to succeed to the profound silence of lying in wait.

'Daddy Fourchon,' the boy whispered, when he was alone with the old man, 'there really be an otter there——'

'Do you see her?'

'There her is!'

The old man was dumbfounded. He distinctly saw the brown skin of an otter swimming along under the water.

'Her is coming along tow'rds me,' said the little fellow.

'Fetch her a slap on the head, and jump in and hold her down at the bottom, and don't let her go——'

Mouche dived into the Avonne like a scared frog.

'Quick, quick! mister,' old Fourchon shouted, as he likewise jumped into the Avonne (leaving his sabots on the bank). 'Just give her a scare! There! look—her is swimming tow'rds you!'

The old man splashed along through the water to Blondet, shouting with the gravity that rustics can preserve through the keenest sense of fun.

'Look, do you see her, along of those rocks.' Blondet, purposely placed so that the sun shone into his eyes, thrashed the water in all good faith.

'There! there! nearer the rocks!' shouted old Fourchon, 'that is where her hole is to your left.' Carried away by vexation, excited by the long suspense,

Blondet took an impromptu footpath, slipping off the stones into the water.

'Hold on! hold on! mister, you have got her.—Oh, heaven and earth! there she goes, right between your legs! Her is off!—Her is off!' cried the old man in desperation. And like one possessed with the fury of the chase, he splashed across till he confronted Blondet.

''Twas your doing that we lost her,' old Fourchon continued; Blondet held out a hand, and he emerged from the water like a Triton—a vanquished Triton. 'Her is there under the rock, the wench!—Her dropped her fish,' he added, pointing to something floating down the stream some distance away. 'Anyhow we shall have the tench, for a tench it is——'

As he spoke they saw a liveried servant on horseback, galloping along the Conches road, holding a second horse by the bridle.

'There! it looks as if the servants from the château were looking for you,' he went on. 'If you want to get back across the river, I will lend you a hand. Oh! I would as soon have a soaking as not, it saves you the trouble of washing your things.'

'And how about catching cold?' asked Blondet.

'Ah, indeed! Don't you see that the sun has browned our shanks like an old pensioner's tobacco pipe. Lean on me, mister. You are from Paris, you don't know how to get foothold on our rocks, for so many things as you know. If you stop here a while, you will learn a sight of things out of the book of nature, you that write the news in the papers.'

Blondet, arrived on the opposite bank, encountered the footman Charles.

'Ah, sir,' cried the man, 'you cannot imagine madame's anxiety when she heard that you had gone out through the Conches gate. She thinks that you are drowned. Three times they rang the second bell for breakfast with might and main, after shouting all over

the park, and M. le Curé is still looking for you there.'

'Why, what time is it, Charles?'

'A quarter to twelve——!'

'Help me to mount——'

Perhaps monsieur has been helping to hunt old Fourchon's otter,' said the man, as he noticed the water dripping from Blondet's boots and trousers.

That question opened the journalist's eyes.

'Not a word about it, Charles, and I will bear you in mind,' cried he.

'Oh, Lord love you, sir, M. le Comte himself was taken in with old Fourchon's otter. As soon as any one new to the place comes to the Aigues, old Fourchon is on the lookout for him; and if the town gentleman goes to see the springs of the Avonne, the old boy sells him his otter. He keeps it up so well, that M. le Comte went back three times and paid him six days' wages while they sat and watched the water flow.'

'And I used to think that I had seen the greatest comedians of the day in Potier and the younger Baptiste,' said Blondet to himself, 'and what are they compared with this beggar?'

'Oh! he is quite up to that game, is old Fourchon,' Charles pursued. 'And he has another string to his bow, for he had himself put down on the register as a ropemaker. He has his rope walk along the wall outside the Blangy gate. If you take it into your head to meddle with his cord, he comes round you so cleverly, that you begin to want to turn the wheel and make a bit of rope yourself, and then he asks you for a prentice's premium. Madame was caught that way, and gave him twenty francs. He is the king of sly-boots,' said Charles, picking his words.

The man's gossip gave Blondet some opportunity of reflecting upon the profound astuteness of the peasantry; he also recalled much that had been said by his father

the judge at Alençon. Then as all the malice lurking beneath old Fourchon's simplicity came up in his mind, Charles's confidences put those remarks in a new light; and he confessed to himself that he had been gulled by the old Burgundian beggar.

'You would not believe, sir, how wide awake you have to be in the country, and here of all places, for the General is not very popular——'

'Why so?'

'Lord, I do not know,' said Charles, with the stupid look a servant can assume to screen a refusal to his betters, a look which gave Blondet plenty of food for reflection.

'So here you are, runaway!' said the General, coming out upon the steps at the sound of horse hoofs.—'Here he is! Set your mind at rest,' he called to his wife, hearing her pattering footsteps.—'Now we are all here but the Abbé Brossette. Go and look for him, Charles,' he said, turning to the servant.

III

THE TAVERN

The Blangy gate dated from Bouret's time. It consisted of two pilasters with 'rustic' bossages, each surmounted by a rampant greyhound holding a scutcheon between its fore-paws. The steward's house was so close to the gate that the great financier had no occasion to build another for a lodge-keeper. An imposing iron grating, of the same style as those made in Buffon's time for the Jardin des Plantes, opened out upon the extreme end of the paved way which led to the cross road. Formerly the Aigues had combined with the house of Soulanges to maintain this local road which connected

Conches and Cerneux and Blangy and Soulanges with Ville-aux-Fayes, as by a flowery chain, so many are the little houses covered with roses and honeysuckle and climbing plants, that are dotted about among the hedge-enclosed domains along its course.

Just outside, along a trim wall, stood a rotten post, a ramshackle wheel and heckle-boards, the entire 'plant' of a village ropemaker. Further, the wall gave place to a ha-ha fence, so that the château commanded a view of the valley as far as Soulanges, and even further.

About half-past twelve o'clock, while Blondet was taking his place at table opposite the Abbé Brossette, and receiving a flattering scolding from the Countess, old Fourchon and Mouche arrived at their ropewalk. Under pretext of making rope, old Fourchon could keep an eye upon the house and spy the movements of the gentry. Indeed, a shutter could not move, no two persons could stroll away together, no trifling incident could take place at the château but the old man knew of it. He had only taken up his position there within the last three years, and neither keepers, nor servants, nor the family had noticed a circumstance so apparently insignificant.

'Go round to the Avonne gate while I put up our tackle,' said old Fourchon; 'and when you have chattered about this, they will come to look for me at the *Grand-I-Vert*. I will have a drop of something there; it is thirsty work stopping in the water like that. If you do just as I have been telling you, you will get a good breakfast out of them; try to speak with the Countess, and go on about me, so that they may take it into their heads to give me a sermon, eh! There will be a glass or two of good wine to tipple down.'

With these final instructions, which, to judge from Mouche's sly looks, were almost superfluous, the old ropemaker tucked his otter under his arm and disappeared down the road.

Halfway between this picturesque gateway and the

village, at the time of Émile Blondet's visit, stood a house such as may be seen anywhere in France in districts where stone is scarce. Brickbats collected from all sources, and great flints roughly set in stiff clay, made fairly solid walls, though the weather had eaten them away. Stout tree boughs upheld a roof thatched with straw and rushes; the clumsy shutters and the door, like everything else about the hovel, were either lucky 'finds' or had been extorted by hard begging.

The peasant brings to the making of his dwelling the same instinct that a wild creature displays in the making of its nest or burrow; this instinct shone conspicuously in the arrangements of the whole cabin. To begin with, the door and window were on the north side, and the house, situated on a little knoll in the stoniest part of a vineyard, should have been healthy enough. It was reached by three steps, ingeniously contrived out of stakes and planks, and filled in with small stones. The rain-water very soon flowed away; and as in Burgundy rain seldom comes from the north, the foundations, flimsy though they were, did not rot with the damp. At the foot of the steps some rustic palings extended along the footpath, till they were lost to sight in a hedge of hawthorn and wildbriar. A collection of rough benches and rickety tables invited passers-by to seat themselves in the shade of the trellised vine which covered the whole space between the hut and the road. In the enclosed garden, on the top of the knoll, grew roses, and pinks, and violets, and all the flowers which cost nothing; honeysuckle and jessamine trails clung about a roof heavy already with moss, in spite of its recent date.

The owner had set up a 'lean-to' cowshed against the right wall of the house. It was a crazy wooden erection, with a sort of yard of beaten earth in front of it, where a huge dunghill stood conspicuous in one corner. An outhouse at the back, a thatched roof,

supported by two tree trunks, did duty as a shed for vinedressers' tools, empty casks, and heaps of faggots piled about the projecting boss of the oven, which in peasants' cottages almost invariably opens just under the chimney shelf.

About an acre of land belonged to the house, a croft enclosed with a quick-set hedge, full of vines, tended as a peasant's vines are tended, so well manured, layered, and trenched, that they came into leaf earlier than any others for three leagues round. The slender tops of a few fruit-trees, almonds, and plums, and apricots, appeared here and there above the hedge. Potatoes or beans were usually growing among the vine stems. Another small wedge-shaped bit of land behind the yard and in the direction of the village was low and damp enough to grow the cabbages and onions dear to the labourer. A latticed gate divided it off from the yard, through which the cows passed, trampling and manuring the earth.

Inside the house, the two rooms on the ground floor opened on to the vineyard; on that side of it, a rough wooden staircase ran up the outer wall under the thatch to a garret lighted by a round window under the roof. Beneath these rustic steps a cellar, built of Burgundian bricks, contained a few hogsheads of wine.

A peasant's *batterie de cuisine* usually consists of a couple of cooking-pots, a frying-pan, and an iron kettle; but in this cottage, by way of exception to the rule, there were two huge saucepans hanging up under the mantel-shelf above a small portable stove. But in spite of this sign of comfort, the furniture generally was in keeping with the outside of the house. An earthen jar held the water; pewter spoons and wooden ladles did duty for silver plate; and the crockery ware was cracked, riveted, brown without and white within. A few deal chairs stood about a solid table, and the floor was of beaten earth. The walls were whitewashed once in five years,

so were the slender rafters of the ceiling, where bacon and ropes of onions, and bunches of candles, hung among the bags in which the peasant keeps his seeds. Beside the bread-hutch stood an old cupboard of black walnut wood, containing such linen as the inmates of the cabin possessed—the spare garments and the Sunday clothes of the whole family.

An antiquated gun shone on the wall above the mantel-shelf, a poacher's weapon, for which you would not have given five francs. The gun-stock was almost charred, nor was there any appearance about the barrel, which looked as if it never was cleaned. Perhaps you may think that as the gate stood open day and night, and the cabin door boasted no fastening but a latch, nothing more efficient in the way of firearms was needed, and ask what earthly use such a weapon might be. But in the first place, rough though the woodwork was, the barrel had been carefully selected; it had belonged to a gun of price, once given, no doubt, to some game-keeper. And the owner of the gun never missed a shot; between him and his weapon there was the intimate understanding that exists between the craftsman and his tool. If the muzzle must be pointed a millimetre above or below the mark, the poacher knows and obeys the rule accurately, and is never out in his reckoning. And an officer of artillery would see that all the essentials were in good working order, nor more nor less. Into everything that the peasant appropriates to his uses he puts the exact amount of energy required to attain the desired end—the necessary labour, and nothing more. He has not the least idea of finish, but he is a perfect judge of the necessities in everything; he knows all the degrees in the scale of energy; and if he works for a master, knows exactly how to do the least possible amount of work for the utmost possible pay. Finally, this very gun played an important part in the family life, as shall presently be shown.

Have you realised all the countless details about this hovel, five hundred paces from the picturesque park gates? Can you picture it squatting there like a beggar by a palace wall? Well, then, beneath all its idyllic rusticity, the velvet mosses of its roof, the cackling hens, the wallowing pig, the lowing heifer, and every sight and sound there lies an ugly significance.

A high pole was set up by the front gate, to exhibit to public view a bush made up of three withered branches of pine and oak, tied in a bunch by a bit of rag. Above the door stood a signboard about two feet square, on which an itinerant artist had painted (for a breakfast) a huge green letter I on a white field—a pun in ten letters for those who could read—the *Grand-I-Vert* (*hiver*). A vulgar gaudy-coloured advertisement on the left-hand side of the door announced 'Good March Beer,' a crude representation of a woman with an exaggeratedly low-necked dress, and a hussar, in uniform, strutting on either side of a foaming pint pot. In spite of the scent of flowers and the country air, a stale reek of wine and eatables always clung about the cabin, the same odour that lies in wait for you as you pass by some pothouse in a low quarter of Paris.

The place you know. Now, behold its inmates. Their history contains more than one lesson for the philanthropist.

The owner of the *Grand-I-Vert*, one François Tonsard, is not unworthy of the attention of philosophers, in that he contrived to solve the problem of how to lead a life of combined industry and idleness, in such a way that his idleness was highly profitable to himself, while no one was a penny the better for his industry.

He was a jack-of-all-trades. He could dig, but only on his own land. He could also do hedging and ditching, bark trees or fell them, for other people, for in all these occupations the master is at the mercy of the man. Tonsard owed his bit of land to Mlle. Laguerre's

generosity. While a mere lad he did a day's work now and again for the gardener at the château, for he had not his match at clipping trees in garden alleys, and trimmed hornbeams, and thorn-trees, and horse-chestnuts to admiration. His name Tonsard—literally, 'the clipper'—is a sufficient indication of an aptitude descended from father to son, and in most country-places such monopolies are secured and maintained with as much cunning as ever city merchants use to the same end.

One day Mlle. Laguerre, strolling in her garden, overheard Tonsard, a fine strapping young fellow, saying, 'All I want to live, and live happily too, is an acre of land!' Whereupon the good-natured creature, accustomed to make others happy, bestowed on Tonsard that bit of vineyard near the Blangy gate in return for a hundred days' work (a piece of delicacy scantily appreciated), and allowed him to take up his quarters at the Aigues, where he lived among the servants, who thought him the best of good fellows in Burgundy.

'Poor Tonsard' (as everybody called him) did about thirty days' work out of the hundred, the rest of the time he spent in laughing and flirting with the maids at the house, and more particularly with Mlle. Cochet, Madame's own woman, though she was as ugly as a charming actress's maid is sure to be. A laugh, with Mlle. Cochet, was something so significant, that Soudry (the happy police sergeant of Blondet's letter) still gave Tonsard black looks after five-and-twenty years. The walnut wood press and the four-post bedstead with curtains, which adorned the bedroom at the *Grand-I-Vert*, were, no doubt, the fruit of one of these titterings.

Once in possession of his bit of land, Tonsard replied to the first person who remarked that 'Madame had given it to him.'

'By George, it's mine! honestly bought and honestly paid for. Do the bourgeois ever give you anything for

nothing? And a hundred days' work is nothing, is it? That has cost me three hundred francs as it is, and the soil is all stones!'

The talk never went beyond the circle of the peasantry.

Tonsard next built the house himself. Finding the materials here and there, asking this one and that to do a hand's turn for him, pilfering odds and ends from the château, or asking, and invariably having what he asked for. A rickety gateway pulled down to be removed found its way to his cowshed. The window came from an old greenhouse. The hut, to prove so fatal to the château, was built up of material from the château.

Tonsard escaped military service, thanks to Gaubertin, Mlle. Laguerre's steward. Gaubertin's father was the public prosecutor of the department, and Gaubertin could refuse Mlle. Cochet nothing. When the house was finished and the vines in full bearing, Tonsard took unto himself a wife. A bachelor of three-and-twenty on a friendly footing at the Aigues, the good-for-nothing to whom Madame had given an acre of land had every appearance of being a hard worker, and he had the wit to make the most of his negative virtues. His wife was the daughter of a tenant on the Ronquerolles estate on the other side of the Forest of the Aigues.

This farmer farmed half a farm, which was going to wreck and ruin in his hands for want of a housewife. The inconsolable widower had tried to drown his cares in drink, in the English fashion; but time went on, he thought no more upon his loss, and at last found himself wedded to the winecask, in the jocular village phrase. Then in no long time the father-in-law ceased to be a farmer, and became a labourer, an idle, mischief-making, quarrelsome sot, sticking at nothing, like most men of his class who fall from a comparatively comfortable position into poverty. He could read and write, his education and practical knowledge raised him above the level of the

ordinary labourer, though his bad habits dragged him down to the level of the tramp; and, as we have seen, he had just been a match for one of the cleverest men in Paris in a Bucolic overlooked by Virgil.

At first they made old Fourchon the village schoolmaster at Blangy, but he lost his place, partly by misconduct, partly by his peculiar views of primary education. His pupils made more progress in the art of making paper boats and chickens out of the pages of their A B C books than in reading; and his homilies on pilfering orchards were strangely like lessons on the best manner of scaling walls. They still quote one of his sayings at Soulanges, an answer given to some urchin who came late with the excuse, 'Lord, sir, I had to take our 'orse to the water.'

'*H*orse we say, ye dunder'ead.'

From a schoolmaster he became postman. This employment, which is as good as a pension to many an old soldier, got Daddy Fourchon into trouble every day of his life. Sometimes he left the letters in a tavern, sometimes he forgot to deliver them, sometimes he kept them in his pocket. When his wits were flustered with liquor, he would leave the correspondence of one commune in another; when he was sober he read the letters. He was promptly dismissed. Having nothing to hope in the way of a Government appointment, Daddy Fourchon at length turned his attention to manufacture. The very poorest do something in country places, and one and all, if they do not make an honest livelihood, make a pretence of earning it.

At the age of sixty-eight Fourchon took to rope-making on a small scale, that being a business in which the least possible amount of capital is needed. The first wall you find (as has been seen) is a sufficient workshop, ten francs will more than pay for your machinery; and the apprentice, like his master, sleeps in a barn, and lives on what he can pick up. So shall you evade the

rapacity of the law which vexes the poor with door and window tax. The raw material you borrow, and return a manufactured article.

But Daddy Fourchon, and Mouche his apprentice (the natural son of one of his natural daughters), had another resource, in fact, their mainstay and support in otter-hunting, to say nothing of breakfasts and dinners given to the pair by illiterate folk who availed themselves of Daddy Fourchon's talents when a letter must be written or a bill made out. Finally, the old man could play the clarionet, and in the company of a crony, the fiddler of Soulanges, Vermichel by name, figured at village weddings and great balls at the Tivoli at Soulanges.

Vermichel's real name was Michel Vert; but the transposition was so much in use, that Brunet, clerk of the justice of the peace at Soulanges, described him in all documents as 'Michel-Jean-Jérôme Vert, otherwise Vermichel, witness.'

Daddy Fourchon had been of use in past times to Vermichel, a fiddler held in high esteem by the old Burgundian Regiment; and Vermichel out of gratitude for those services had procured for his friend the post of *practitioner* —(the privilege of appearing before the justice of the peace in the interests of this or that person), for which any man who can sign his name is eligible in out-of-the-way places. So Daddy Fourchon's signature was appended to any judicial documents drawn up by the Sieur Brunet in the communes of Cerneux, Conches, and Blangy; and the names of Vermichel and Fourchon, bound together by a friendship cemented by twenty years of hobnobbing, seemed almost like the style of a firm.

Mouche and Fourchon, united as closely each to each by malpractices as Mentor and Telemachus of old by virtues, travelled like their anti-types in search of bread; *panis angelorum*, the only words of Latin that linger yet in the memories of grey-headed villagers. The pair negotiated the scraps at Tonsard's tavern, or at the great

houses roundabout; for between them in their busiest and most prosperous years their achievement scarcely exceeded an average of some seven hundred yards of rope. In the first place, no tradesman for sixty miles round would have trusted either of them with a hank of tow, for this venerable person (anticipating the miracles of modern science) knew but too well how to transform the hemp into the divine juice of the grape. And in the second place, besides being private secretary to three communes, Fourchon appeared for plaintiff or defendant before the justice of the peace, and performed at merrymakings upon the clarionet—his public duties were the ruin of his trade, he said.

So Tonsard's hopes so fondly cherished were nipped in the bud. Those comfortable additions to his property would never be his, and the ordinary luck of life confronted a lazy son-in-law with another do-nothing in the shape of his wife's father. And things were bound to do much the worse in that La Tonsard, a tall and shapely woman with a kind of broad-blown comeliness, showed no sort of taste for field work. Tonsard bore his wife a grudge for her father's bankruptcy, and treated her badly, taking his revenge after the fashion familiar to a class that sees the effects, but seldom traces the cause.

The wife, finding her bondage hard, sought alleviations. She took advantage of Tonsard's vices to govern him. He was an ease-loving glutton, so she encouraged him in idleness and gluttony. She managed to secure for him the goodwill of the servants at the château, and he, satisfied with the results, did not grumble at the means. He troubled himself uncommonly little about his wife's doings, so long as she did all that he required of her, a tacit understanding in which every second married couple lives. The tavern was La Tonsard's next invention, and her first customers were the servants, gamekeepers, and prickers from the Aigues.

Gaubertin, Mlle. Laguerre's agent, was one of *La*

belle Tonsard's earliest patrons; he let her have a few hogsheads of good wine to attract custom. The effect of these presents, periodically renewed so long as Gaubertin remained a bachelor, together with the fame of the not too obdurate beauty among the Don Juans of the valley, brought custom to the house. La Tonsard, being fond of good eating, became an excellent cook; and though she exercised her talents only on dishes well known in the country, such as jugged hare, game sauce, sea-pie, and omelettes, she was supposed to understand to admiration the art of cooking a meal served at a table's end, and so prodigiously over-seasoned that it induces thirst. In these ways she managed Tonsard; she gave him a downward push, and he asked nothing better than to abandon himself and rolled luxuriously down hill.

The rogue became a confirmed poacher; he had nothing to fear. His wife's relations with Gaubertin, bailiffs, and keepers, and the relaxed notions of property of the Revolution, assured him of complete impunity. As soon as the children grew big enough, he made what he could out of them, and was no more scrupulous as to their conduct than he had been with his wife's. He had two girls and two boys. Tonsard lived, like his wife, from hand to mouth, and there would soon have been an end of this merry life of his if he had not laid down the almost martial law, that every one in his house must contribute to his comfort, in which for that matter the rest of them shared. By the time that the family was reared at the expense of those from whom the wife knew how to extort presents, this is a statement of the finances of the *Grand-I-Vert.*

Tonsard's old mother and two girls, Catherine and Marie, were always picking up firewood. Twice a day they would come home bending under the weight of a faggot that reached to the ankle and projected a couple of feet above their heads. The outside of the faggot was made of dead sticks; the green wood often cut from

young saplings was hidden away inside it. In the fullest sense of the words, Tonsard took all his winter fuel from the Forest of the Aigues.

The father and both boys were habitual poachers. From September to March all the game that they did not eat at home they sold. Hares and rabbits, partridges, thrushes, and roebucks—they took them all to Soulanges, the little town where Tonsard's girls took milk from door to door every morning and carried back the news, taken in exchange for the gossip of the Aigues, Cerneux, and Conches. When their season was over, the three Tonsards set snares, and if the snares were too successful, La Tonsard made pies and sold them in Ville-aux-Fayes. In harvest-time the whole family—the old mother, the two lads (until they were seventeen years old), the two girls, old Fourchon and Mouche, seven in all of the Tonsard clan—mustered and went gleaning. They would pick up nearly sixteen bushels a day among them, rye, barley, wheat—anything that was grist for the mill.

At first the youngest girl took the two cows to graze by the side of the road; though the animals, for the most part, broke through the hedges into the fields of the Aigues. But as the rural policeman was bound to take cognisance of anything of the nature of flagrant trespass, the slightest mistake on the children's part was always punished by a whipping or by the loss of some dainty, till they had become singularly expert at hearing sounds of an approaching enemy. The keepers at the Aigues and the rural policeman scarcely ever caught them in the act. Moreover, the relations between the aforesaid functionaries and the Tonsards, husband and wife, dimmed their eyes to these things. The cows soon grew obedient to a pull at the long cord, or a low peculiar call, when they found that as soon as the danger was past they might leave the roadside to finish their meal in the neighbouring field.

Tonsard's old mother, growing more and more feeble, succeeded to Mouche when old Fourchon took him away under pretence of educating the boy himself. Marie and Catherine made hay in the woods. They knew the patches where the grass grows sweet and delicate, and cut and turned it, and made and stacked the hay. They found two-thirds of the winter fodder in the woods, and on the sunniest winter days took the cows to pasture on spots well known to them where the grass was green even in cold weather; for in certain places round about the Aigues, as in Piedmont and Lombardy and every hill country, there are bits of land where the grass grows in winter. Such a meadow, called a *marcita* in Italy, is a very valuable property there; but in France, to do well, there must be neither too much frost nor too much snow. The phenomenon is doubtless due partly to a particular aspect, partly to the infiltration of the water, which keeps the land at a higher temperature.

The calves brought in about eighty francs; and the milk, after making deductions for the calves, was worth about a hundred and sixty francs in money, besides the supply for the house and the dairy. Tonsard made some hundred and fifty crowns by doing a day's work for one and another.

The tavern, all expenses paid, brought in about three hundred francs, not more, for merry-makings are essentially short lived, and confined to certain seasons. La Tonsard and her husband, moreover, usually received notice of a 'bean-feast' beforehand, and laid in the small quantity of meat required and the necessary provisions from the town. In ordinary years the wine from the Tonsards' vineyard fetched twenty francs the cask (the cask not included); a tavern-keeper at Soulanges, with whom Tonsard had dealings, was the purchaser. In abundant years the vineyard would yield twelve hogsheads, but the average produce was eight, and half of these Tonsard kept for his own trade. In vine-growing

districts the grape gleanings are the perquisite of the vintagers, and the grape gleaning was worth three casks of wine annually to the Tonsard family. Sheltered by local customs, they showed little conscience in their proceedings, finding their way into vineyards before the vintagers had done their work, just as they hurried into the cornfields where the sheaves stood waiting to be carted away. So, of the seven or eight hogsheads sold, one-half was cribbed, and fetched a better price. There was a certain amount of dead loss to be deducted in the budget, for Tonsard and his wife always ate of the best, and drank better liquor than they sold—supplied to them by their Soulanges correspondent in exchange for their own wines, but altogether, the money made by the united efforts of the family amounted to nine hundred francs or thereabouts, for they fattened a couple of pigs every year—one for themselves, and one for sale.

As time went on the tavern became the favourite haunt of labourers and of all the scamps in the country-side; this was due partly to the talents of the Tonsard family, partly to the good fellowship existing between them and the lowest class in the valley. Then both the girls were remarkably handsome, and walked in the ways of their mother; and finally, the *Grand-I-Vert* was such an old-established tavern (dating, as it did, from 1795), that it became an institution. From Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes the labourers came to conclude their bargains there, and to hear the news gathered by the Tonsard girls and Mouche and Fourchon, retailed by Vermichel or Brunet, the most renowned clerk of Soulanges, who came thither to find his practitioners.

The prices of hay and wine, day-work and piece-work, were fixed there; questions were referred to Tonsard's decision; and he, a sovereign judge in such matters, gave advice and drank with the rest. Soulanges, so the saying ran, was simply a fashionable place where people amused themselves; Blangy was the place for business, albeit

eclipsed by the great metropolis of Ville-aux-Fayes, which in twenty-five years had come to be the capital of the magnificent valley. The grain and cattle market was held in the square at Blangy; the ruling prices there served as a guide for the whole district.

La Tonsard, being a keeper-at-home, was still plump and fair and young looking, when women who work in the fields fade as quickly as the field flowers, and are old crones at thirty. Moreover, La Tonsard liked to look her best. She was only neat and tidy, but in a village tidiness and neatness means luxury. The girls were dressed better than befitted their poverty, and followed their mother's example. Their bodices were almost elegant, and the linen beneath was finer than any that the richest peasant's wife wears. On high days and holidays they appeared in fine frocks, paid for heaven only knows how. The servants at the Aigues let them have their cast-off clothing at a price within their reach; and gowns which had swept the pavements in Paris, altered to suit Marie and Catherine, were flaunted at the sign of the *Grand-I-Vert*. Neither of the girls, the gypsies of the valley, received a farthing from their parents, who merely boarded and lodged them, letting them lie in the loft at night on filthy mattresses, where the grandmother and two brothers slept as well, all huddled together in the hay like brutes. Neither father nor mother thought anything of this promiscuity. The age of iron and the age of gold have more resemblances than we think. Nothing arouses vigilance in the one, everything arouses it in the other, and for Society the result is apparently the same. The old woman's presence, which seemed to be less a safeguard than a necessity, only made matters worse.

The Abbé Brossette, after a close study of the state of things among his parishioners, made this profound remark to the Bishop—

'When you see how greatly they rely on their

poverty, my lord, you can guess that these peasantry are in terror of losing their great excuse for their dissolute lives.'

Everybody was aware how little the Tonsard family knew of scruples or principles, but nobody found any fault with their way of life.

At the outset of this *Scène* it must be explained, once for all, that the peasant's code is not the bourgeois code, and that in family life the peasants have no sort of delicacy. If a daughter is seduced, they do not take a moral tone unless the seducer is rich and can be frightened. Their children, until the State tears them away from their parents, are so much capital, or are made to conduce to their parents' comfort. Selfishness, more especially since 1789, is the one force that sets them thinking; they never ask whether such a thing is illegal or immoral, but what good it will do them.

Morality, which must not be confused with religion, begins with a competence, just as in still higher spheres delicacy flourishes in human nature as soon as fortune has gilded the surrounding furniture. An entirely honest and well-conducted peasant is an exception to his class. The curious will ask how this is, and here is the principal cause, one of many which might be advanced—The peasant's functions in the social scale bring him into close contact with nature; he lives a purely material life, very much like the life of a savage. The toil which exhausts the body leaves the mind stagnant, and this is especially the case with uneducated people. And, finally, their poverty is their *raison d'État*, and their necessity is to them a necessity, as the Abbé Brossette said.

Tonsard was ready to listen to the complaint of every one, and frauds useful to the needy were invented under his direction. The wife, a good-natured woman to all appearance, helped evil-doers with a rancorous tongue, and never withheld her countenance

or refused a helping-hand when anything against 'the masters' was afoot. The tavern was a perfect nest of vipers, where the hatred which the proletariat and the peasantry bear to the rich and their employers was nursed and kept alive, venomous and active.

The Tonsards' prosperity was, in those times, the worst of examples. Every one asked himself why he should not help himself to wood as they did in the Forest of the Aigues, and find fuel for the oven and faggots for cold weather. Why should not every one else feed a cow on rich people's pastures, and have game enough to eat and to sell? Why should not they reap without sowing at harvest and vintage? Then the underhand theft, which robbed the woods and took tithes of the cornland, meadows, and vineyards, promptly came to be regarded as a vested interest in the communes of Blangy, Conches, and Cerneux, which encircled the Aigues. This canker, for reasons which will be explained in the proper place, was far worse on the Aigues estate than on the lands of Ronquerolles and Soulanges. Do not imagine that Tonsard, or his old mother, or wife or children, ever said in so many words, 'We will steal our living, and we will do our thieving cleverly.' The habits had formed slowly. The family began by mixing a few green boughs with the sticks; then, grown bold with habit, and purposely allowed to go unpunished (part of a scheme to be developed in the course of the story), in twenty years' time they had come to the point of 'taking *their* wood,' and making a living almost entirely by pilfering. The right of pasture for their cows, the abuse of the privileges of gleaning and grape-gleaning, had been established little by little in this way; and when once the Tonsards and the rest of the lazy peasants in the valley had felt the benefit of the four rights acquired by the poor in the country, rights pushed almost to spoliation, it may be imagined that they were not likely to relinquish them unless compelled by some force stronger than their audacity.

At the time when this story begins, Tonsard was about fifty years old. He was a tall, strong man, somewhat inclined to stoutness, with black woolly hair, and face of a startling hue, mottled with purplish streaks like a brick, yellow whites to his eyes, flapping ears with huge rims, a low flattened forehead, and hanging lip. A deceptive flabbiness of flesh covered the muscles beneath, and the man's true character was hidden under a certain stupidity enlightened by flashes of experience, which seemed the more like wit because, in the society of his father-in-law, he had learned a dialect called 'chaff' in the dictionary of Messieurs Fourchon and Vermichel. Tonsard's nose was flattened at the end as if the finger of God had set a mark upon him; he spoke in consequence from the roof of the mouth, like those whom disease has disfigured by thickening of the nasal passages through which the breath passes with difficulty. His front teeth overlapped—a defect ominously significant, according to Lavater, and the more conspicuous because they were white as a dog's teeth. There was that in the man, beneath the veneer of an idle fellow's good humour and the easy-going ways of a tippling boor, which should have alarmed the least perspicacious.

Tonsard's portrait, the picture of his cabin, and the sketch of his father-in-law, seem to occupy a prominent position, but you may be sure that this place is due to the man, the tavern, and the family; for the life which has been so minutely described is a typical life, one of a hundred led by peasants in the valley; and although Tonsard was only a tool in the hands of a deeply rooted and energetic hate, he personally exercised an immense influence on the fortunes of the battle about to begin; he was the cave to which all that were discontented among the lowest class betook themselves; his tavern (as will shortly be seen) was over and over again the trysting-place of the party, even as he himself became the head of the movement, by reason of the terror which

he inspired, less by what he actually did than by what people expected him to do. The poacher's threats were quite as much dreaded as his action; he was never obliged to carry out a single one of them.

Every rebellion, open or covert, has its standard. The flag of marauders, idlers, and sots, therefore, was the redoubtable bush at the top of the pole by the gate of the *Grand-I-Vert*. People found it amusing in the tavern, and amusement is as much sought after and as hard to find in the country as in the town. There was no other inn, moreover, along twelve miles of road, a journey which loaded vehicles easily made in three hours, so all who came and went between Conches and Ville-aux-Fayes stopped at the tavern if only for a rest. Then the miller, the deputy-mayor of the arrondissement, came in now and then, and his lads came too; the General's servants did not despise the little wineshop, for Tonsard's two girls were an attraction, and so it fell out that through this subterranean connection with the château, the Tonsards could learn all that they desired. It is impossible, by dint of benefits conferred or expected, to break the permanent alliance between servants and the people. The lackey comes from the people, and to the people he belongs. This ill-omened good-fellowship explains Charles's discreet choice of language at the foot of the flight of steps.

IV

ANOTHER IDYLL.

'Oh! Lord sakes, dad!' cried Tonsard, at the sight of his father-in-law, who he suspected had come for a breakfast. 'You are dry in the throat too early of a morning! We have nothing for you!—And how about

that rope, the rope you were to make for us? It is a marvel how you work at it of an evening, and find so little done next morning. You ought to have twisted enough to twist your own neck with ages ago, for you are growing altogether too dear——'

(The wit of the peasant and labourer is of the exceedingly Attic kind, which consists in saying the thing that you really think with a certain grotesque exaggeration; nor is the wit of drawing-rooms essentially different; intellectual subtleties replace the picturesqueness of coarse, forcible language, that is all the difference.)

''Tisn't a father-in-law,' the old man interrupted; 'treat me as a customer. I want a bottle of the best.'

So saying, Fourchon sat down, showing a five-franc piece that shone like a sun through his fingers as he rapped on the sorry table—a piece of furniture curious to behold by reason of its charred spots, wine stains, and notches covered with a coating of grease. At the sound of silver, Marie Tonsard, like a privateering corvette on a cruise, gave her grandfather a quick glance, a sly look that gleamed like a yellow spark in her blue eyes; and the jingling of the metal brought La Tonsard out of her room.

'You are always hard on poor father,' said she, looking at Tonsard, 'and yet he earns a good deal of money in a year. God grant it is honestly come by!—Let us have a look at this,' she added, and she pounced down on the coin, and snatched it out of old Fourchon's hands.

'Go, Marie,' Tonsard said with gravity; 'there is still some wine in bottle left under the shelf.'

(In country places there is but one quality of wine, but it is sold under two names—wine from the cask, and wine in bottle.)

'Where did that come from?' La Tonsard demanded of her father, as she slipped the coin into her pocket.

'Philippine, you will come to a bad end,' retorted her

parent, shaking his head, without an attempt to recover his money. By this time, doubtless, Fourchon recognised the futility of a struggle between his terrible son-in-law, his daughter, and himself.

'There's one more bottle of wine for which you get five francs out of me,' he added sarcastically, 'but that shall be the last. I shall take my custom to the Café de la Paix.'

'You be quiet, father,' returned the fat, fair mistress of the house, who was rather like a Roman matron. 'You want a shirt, a tidy pair of trousers, and another hat, and I should like to see you in a new waistcoat at last.'

'I have told you before that that would be the ruin of me!' the old man shouted. 'If people think I am rich, they won't give me anything.'

The entrance of the fair-haired Marie with the bottle cut short old Fourchon's eloquence, for he did not lack that characteristic of an outspokenness which permits itself to say everything, and shrinks from giving no thought expression however atrocious it may be.

'Then you have no mind to tell us where you bag so much money?' asked Tonsard. 'Some of us might go there, I suppose?——'

The brutal master of the house, while finishing a snare, was eyeing his father-in-law. He scanned the old man's trousers, and soon spied the round edge of the second five-franc piece in his pocket.

'Here's to you!—I am turning capitalist,' said old Fourchon.

'So you could, if you liked,' said Tonsard; 'you are clever enough, you are, only the devil made a hole in the bottom of your head, and everything runs down through it.'

'Eh! I have been playing off the otter dodge on that young fellow from Paris up at the Aigues, that is all!'

'If many people were to come to see the source of the

Avonne, you would be rich, Daddy Fourchon,' said Marie.

'Yes,' and he drank off the last glass of his bottle. 'But I have played the otter dodge so often, that the otters are growing angry, and one ran between my legs, which will bring me twenty francs and more.'

'You made an otter out of tow, daddy, I'll be bound,' said La Tonsard, with a knowing look at the old man.

'If you give me a pair of trousers, a waistcoat, and a pair of list braces, so as I shan't be too much of a discredit to Vermichel on our platform at *The Tivoli* (for old Socquard is always grumbling at me), I will let you keep the money, daughter; your idea is quite worth it. I may take in that young fellow again; after this one try, he may very likely take to otter-hunting.'

'Go and find us another bottle,' said Tonsard, addressing his daughter.—'If your father had an otter, he would let us see it,' he added, speaking to his wife. He hoped to rouse Fourchon's vanity.

'I am too much afraid of seeing her in your frying-pan,' the old man said, and one little green eye winked at La Tonsard. 'Philippine has just sneaked my five-franc piece, and how much haven't you bullied out of me for clothes and board, forsooth!—And you tell me that I am dry too early in the day, and I never have clothes to my back——'

'Because you sold your last suit to buy spiced wine at the Café de la Paix!' said his daughter; 'and, proof of that, Vermichel tried to stop you——'

'Vermichel! After I stood treat! Vermichel is incapable of treachery to friendship. It will be that hundredweight of stale bacon on two legs that he is not ashamed to call his wife!'

'He or she,' said Tonsard, 'or Bonnébault——'

'If it was Bonnébault,' retorted Fourchon, 'him as is one of the pillars of the Café—I'll—I'll—— That's enough!'

'But where's the harm if you did sell your things, old plate-licker? You sold them because you sold them; you are of age,' returned Tonsard, slapping the old man's knee. 'Come, give your custom to my barrels, redden your gullet; the missus's father has a right to do it, and better do that than carry your white silver to Socquard's.'

'To think that you have played tunes for them to dance to at the Tivoli these fifteen years, and cannot find out how Socquard mulls his wine, you that are so cunning!' said his daughter, addressing her parent. 'And yet you know quite well that with that secret we should be as rich as Rigou.'

In the Morvan, and that strip of Burgundy which lies on the Paris side of the Morvan, the spiced wine with which La Tonsard reproached her father is a somewhat expensive beverage, which plays a great part in the lives of the peasants. Grocers compound it with more or less success, so do lemonade-makers where there are cafés. The delectable drink, composed of choice wine, sugar, cinnamon, and other spices, is much to be preferred to the multifarious mixtures and disguised forms of brandy known as ratafia, *cent-sept-ans*, *eau-des-braves*, cordial, vespetro, *esprit-de-soleil*, and the like. Spiced wine is to be found even on the very borders of Switzerland. In wild nooks in the Jura, where an occasional determined tourist penetrates, the innkeepers call it Wine of Syracuse, taking the word of commercial travellers. It is not bad in itself; and when mountain-climbing has induced a wolfish hunger, you are only too glad to pay the three or four francs charged for a bottle. In every household in Burgundy or the Morvan any trifling ailment or excitement is an excuse for drinking spiced wine. Women take it before and after a confinement with toast and sugar. Peasants have been known to squander their whole substance on spiced wine, and not unfrequently the too attractive liquor necessitates marital correction.

'There is no smoking that,' said Fourchon. 'Socquard always shuts himself up to make his spiced wine. He did not let his wife that's gone into the secret, and he has everything from Paris to make the stuff.'

'Don't you tease your father,' cried Tonsard. 'He doesn't know—well and good, he doesn't know. One can't know everything.'

Fourchon felt uneasy at this affability of speech and countenance on the part of his son-in-law.

'Be you minded to rob me?' the old man asked naïvely.

'*I've* nothing but what lawfully belongs to me,' said Tonsard; 'and when I take anything away from you, I am only helping myself to the portion you promised I should have.'

The rough words reassured Fourchon. He bowed his head, like a man convicted and convinced.

'There's a fine springe,' Tonsard continued, coming up to his father-in-law, and putting the trap on the old man's knees. 'They will want game up at the Aigues, and we will supply them with some of their own, certain sure, or there is no Providence for us poor folk.'

'You have made a good strong job of it,' said the old man, surveying the deadly engine.

'Let us pick up a few pence at any rate, dad,' said La Tonsard; 'we shall have our slice of the loaf of the Aigues——'

'Babblers!' Tonsard broke in. 'If I am hanged, it will not be for a gun-shot, but the clack of your daughter's tongue.'

'Then do you think that the Aigues will be sold in lots, for the sake of your ugly phiz? What, old Rigou has been sucking the marrow out of your bones these thirty years, and you don't know that the bourgeois are worse than the seigneurs? When that affair comes off, those nobodies, the Soudrys, Gaubertins, and Rigous will set you dancing to the tune of "*J'ai du*

bon tabac, tu n'en auras pas," the national anthem of the rich, eh? The peasant will always be the peasant. Don't you see (but you know nothing about politics) that Government puts on the wine-dues simply to do us out of our chink and keep us poor? The bourgeois or the Government, it is all one. What would become of them if we were all rich? Would they work in the fields? Would they do the harvesting?—They must have poor folk. I was rich for ten years, and I know quite well what I used to think about paupers!'

'You must hunt with them, all the same,' said Tonsard, 'because they break up the big estates into lots, and we can turn on Rigou afterwards. He is eating up Courtecuisse; but if I were in Courtecuisse's place, poor fellow, I would have paid my shot in lead instead of silver, long ago——'

'Right you are,' said Fourchon. 'It is as old Niseron says, who kept on being a Republican after everybody else left off, "The people dies hard, the people don't die, they have time on their side!"'

The old man dropped into a kind of dream. Tonsard took advantage of this to take back his springe; but as he laid his hand upon it, he made a slit with a pair of scissors in the old man's trousers, and just as Fourchon raised his glass to drink, the five-franc piece slid down to a place on the floor that was always damp with the dregs of glasses. Tonsard set his foot on it. It was neatly done; yet the old man might perhaps have found it out if Vermichel had not turned up at that very moment.

'Tonsard!' called that functionary from the foot of the steps. 'Where is your dad, do you know?'

Vermichel shouted, the coin was stolen, and the glass emptied simultaneously.

'Here, Captain!' said Fourchon, holding out a hand to help Vermichel up the steps.

You cannot imagine a type more thoroughly Burgundian than Vermichel. His countenance, not crimson

but scarlet, like certain tropical portions of the globe bore several conspicuous extinct volcanoes, and a greenish eruption, which Fourchon rather poetically called 'grog blossoms.' The features of this inflamed face had been swollen out of all knowledge through habitual drunkenness; it was a cyclopean visage, with an eye keen and wide awake on one side, but blind on the other, where the sight was obscured by a yellowish film. With a shock head of red hair, and a beard of the traditional Judas pattern, Vermichel's appearance was as formidable as his nature was harmless. His trumpet-like nose was a sort of note of interrogation, to which a huge slit of a mouth seemed to reply even when shut.

Vermichel was a little man. He wore iron-bound shoes, trousers of bottle-green velveteen, an ancient waistcoat so much mended that it looked like a bit of patchwork quilt, a rough blue cloth coat, and a broad-brimmed grey hat. This splendour of costume—demanded of him by his functions in the town of Soulanges, where he combined the offices of hall-porter at the townhall, town-crier, gaoler, fiddler, and solicitor—was entirely due to the exertions of Mme. Vermichel, a terrible foe to Rabelaisian philosophy. This moustached virago, a good yard broad, seventeen stone in weight, and active in proportion to her size, bore rule over Vermichel; she beat him when he was drunk, and when he was sober he allowed her to beat him, for which reason old Fourchon cast contemptuous eyes on Vermichel's apparel—'The garb of a slave!' he used to call it.

'Talk of the sun and you see his rays,' Fourchon continued, repeating an old joke occasioned by Vermichel's red beaming countenance, and indeed it was not unlike the gilded sun hung out for a sign above country inns. 'Did your missus see too much dust on your jacket, and are you running away from your four-fifths? (for you can't call that wife of yours your better

half.) What brings you here so early, eh, beaten drum?'

'Politics as usual,' said Vermichel; evidently he was used to these jokes.

'Oh! Business is flat at Blangy, and we shall have bills protested directly,' said old Fourchon, pouring out a glass for his friend.

'Our ape is on my tracks,' said Vermichel, raising his glass.

In labourers' slang, the *ape* is the master. This was another expression in Messrs. Vermichel and Fourchon's dictionary.

'Why is Master Brunet coming to bother us up here?' demanded La Tonsard.

'Eh, goodness, you people have brought him in more than you are worth yourselves these three years.—Oh, the master up at the Aigues is going to pay you out properly. He is coming on well, is the Upholsterer.—As old Brunet says, "If there were three like him in the valley, my fortune would be made——"'

'What have they been plotting fresh against the poor folk?' asked Marie.

'My word,' answered Vermichel, 'he is no fool, he isn't! You will have to knuckle under in the long run.—There is no help for it! They have been in force for the last two years, with their four gamekeepers and a mounted patrol all running about like ants, and a forester that works like a nigger. And now the police will do anything they like for them.—They will grind you down——'

'Not they!' said Tonsard; 'we are too small already. It is not the trees as stands out longest, it 's the grass.'

'Don't you believe it,' old Fourchon retorted; 'you have land of your own——'

'After all,' Vermichel went on, 'those folk are very fond of you, for they think of you from morning to night. This is the sort of thing they say—"Those

people pasture their cattle on our meadows, so we will take their cattle away from them, and then they cannot eat the grass in our meadows themselves." As one and all of you have judgments hanging over you, they have given orders to our *ape* to seize your cows. We are going to begin with Conches; this morning we shall seize Mother Bonnébault's cow, Godain's cow, Mitant's cow——'

As soon as Marie heard the name of Bonnébault, she looked knowingly at her father and mother, and darted out of the house and into the vineyard; she was Bonnébault's sweetheart, and the old woman with the cow was Bonnébault's grandmother. She slipped like an eel through a hole in the hedge, and fled away to Conches with the speed of a hare with the hounds on her track.

'They will do this much,' said Tonsard placidly; 'they will get their bones broken, and that will be a pity, for their mothers won't find them new ones.'

'That may very well happen, all the same,' assented Fourchon.—'But look here, Vermichel, I can't come with you for an hour yet; I have important business at the château.'

'More important than three fees of five sous each? You had better not quarrel with your own bread and butter.'

'My business lies at the Aigues, I tell you, Vermichel,' said old Fourchon, with ludicrous self-importance.

'Besides, suppose that father had better be out of the way,' said La Tonsard. 'Now, maybe you would mean to look for the cows?' she queried.

'M. Brunet is a good soul; if he finds nothing but the cow-dung, he will ask no better,' answered Vermichel. 'A man like him, that has to go about the roads of a night, ought to mind what he is about.'

'If he does, he is right,' Tonsard said drily.

'So he talks like this to M. Michaud,' Vermichel went on. "I shall go as soon as the court rises." If he

really meant to find the cows, he would have gone to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. But there, go he must, M. Brunet. You won't catch Michaud napping twice; he is an old dog, and up to everything. Ah, there's a ruffian for you!'

'A bully like that ought to have stopped in the army,' said Tonsard; 'he is only fit to let loose on the enemy. I wish he would come here, I know, and ask me my name; he may call himself a veteran of the Young Guard as much as he pleases, sure am I that after we measured our spurs, I'd pull more feathers out of the old cock than he would have out of me.'

'Oh, by the by,' said La Tonsard, turning to Vermichel, 'there are the advertisements of the Fête at Soulanges, when will they be out? Here we are at the 8th of August.'

'I took them yesterday to the printer, M. Bournier at Ville-aux-Fayes,' said Vermichel.—'There was talk at Ma'am Soudry's of fireworks on the lake.'

'What a lot of people we shall have!' cried Fourchon.

'And the takings of days together for Socquard,' said Tonsard enviously.

'Oh, perhaps it will rain,' added his wife, as if to reassure herself.

The sound of horse hoofs came from the direction of Soulanges, and five minutes later the clerk of the court tied his horse to a stake set for that purpose by the wicket-gate, near the cowshed. He soon showed his face at the door.

'Come, come, boys, let us lose no time,' cried he, with a pretence of hurry.

'Ha!' said Vermichel, 'here's a deserter for you, M. Brunet. Daddy Fourchon wants to drop out of this business.'

'He has had a drop too much,' retorted the clerk, 'but the law does not require him to be sober.'

'Asking your pardon, M. Brunet,' said Fourchon, 'I

am expected at the Aigues on business; there is a bargain for an otter on hand.'

Brunet was a little dried-up man, dressed in black cloth from head to foot. With his bilious complexion, sly eyes, crisp hair, firm mouth, pinched nose, fidgety manner, and hoarse voice, his whole appearance and character exactly suited his profession. So well versed was he in law, or, rather, in chicanery, that he was at once the adviser and the terror of the canton; and, moreover, he did not lack a certain kind of popularity among the peasants, of whom, for the most part, he took payment in kind. All his positive and negative qualities, together with his knowledge of their ways, had brought him a practice in the district, to the prejudice of his colleague, Maître Plissoud, of whom more will be said later on. It not unfrequently happens in country places that one clerk of the peace does all the business, and the other has none.

'Then is there any hurry?' asked Tonsard of little Brunet.

'There is no help for it! You are plundering that man beyond everything, and it's in self-defence,' said the clerk. 'This whole business of yours will end badly; the Government will take it up.'

'So we poor wretches are to die like dogs, are we?' asked Tonsard, bringing out a glass of brandy on a saucer for the clerk.

'The poor may die like dogs, there will always be plenty left,' said Fourchon sententiously.

'And then you do more damage than a little in the woods,' pursued the man of law.

'Don't you believe it, M. Brunet; there is a good deal of noise made about a few miserable faggots, that there is!' said La Tonsard.

'They did not clear away enough rich people at the time of the Revolution, that is all,' said Tonsard.

As he spoke a sound was heard, alarming in that it

was inexplicable. A sound of footsteps at a furious pace, the rattle of arms rising above a crackling sound of brushwood dragged along the ground, and a patter of feet that fled faster than the pursuer. Two voices as different as the footsteps bawled interjections. The group in the tavern knew that it was a man in hot chase and a woman in flight, but why and wherefore? The suspense did not last long.

'That's mother,' remarked Tonsard, starting up; 'I know her squall.'

And in another moment, after springing up the broken steps with a final effort such as smugglers' legs alone can make, Granny Tonsard fell backwards, sprawling in their midst. The huge mass of wood and sticks in her faggot made a terrific amount of noise as it bent and broke against the lintel and the ceiling. Every one whisked out of her way. Tables, bottles, and chairs were overturned in all directions as the branches fell about; the whole cabin might have fallen in with a less mighty crash.

'He has killed me, the scamp! the shock has killed me——'

Then the old woman's shriek, flight, and sudden entrance were all explained by an apparition on the threshold; there stood a man dressed in green cloth from head to foot, his hat bound with a silver cord, a sabre at his side, and the crest of Montcornet and Troisville stamped on his shoulder belt; he wore the regulation red soldier's waistcoat and leather gaiters reaching just above the knee.

It was a forester. There was a moment's hesitation; then the man exclaimed, as he saw Brunet and Vermichel, 'I have witnesses!'

'Of what?' asked Tonsard.

'That woman has an oak ten years old, chopped into billets, in her faggot. Downright stealing!'

As soon as the word 'witness' was pronounced,

Vermichel considered that the moment was eminently suitable for going into the croft to take the air.

'Witnesses of what? Of what?' cried Tonsard, planting himself in front of the forester, while La Tonsard raised her prostrate mother-in-law. 'Have the goodness to show me a clean pair of heels, Vatel! Pounce on people and draw up your reports on the highway where you are on your own ground, you brigand, but get out of this. My house belongs to me, I suppose. A man's house is his castle——'

'I caught your mother in the act, and she will come along with me.'

'Arrest my mother in my house! You have no right to do it! My house is inviolable, every one knows that much at least. Have you a magistrate's warrant from M. Guerbet? Ah! that is what the police must have before they come into the house, and you are not a policeman, though you may have taken your oath at the court to make us die of hunger, you pitiful forest catch-poll.'

The forester's rage rose to such a pitch that he tried to seize on the faggot; but the old hag, a hideous, dirty bit of parchment endowed with life, such as you will not see save in David's picture of the *Sabines*, yelled, 'If you touch that, I'll go for your eyes.'

'Look here, I dare you to undo the faggot before M. Brunet,' said the forester.

Although the clerk assumed the air of indifference which officials learn to wear in experience of affairs, he looked at the host and his wife, and blinked in a way which meant, 'This is a bad business!'

As for old Fourchon, he pointed to the heap of ashes on the hearth, and looked at his daughter. In a moment La Tonsard grasped the situation, her mother-in-law's peril, and her father's mute counsel; she snatched up a handful of ashes, and dashed it full in the forester's eyes. Vatel began to yell. Tonsard, illuminated by all the

light of which the other was bereft, pushed him roughly out on to the steps, where a blind man might easily miss his footing. Vatel rolled down into the road, and dropped his gun. In the twinkling of an eye the faggot was unbound, the logs extracted, and hidden with nimbleness which no words can describe. Brunet, having no mind to be a witness to an exploit which he had foreseen, hurried out to the forester's assistance, picked him up, set him on the bank, and went to soak his handkerchief in water, so as to bathe the sufferer's eyes; for, in spite of the pain, the man was trying to drag himself towards the brook.

'Vatel, you are in the wrong,' said the clerk. 'You have no right to enter a house, you know——'

On the threshold stood the old woman, a dwarfish, almost hunchbacked figure; lightnings flashed from her eyes, while insults poured from her tongue; the toothless crone foamed at the mouth, standing with her hands on her hips, yelling so loud that they might have heard her at Blangy.

'Ah! scamp, serves you right, it does! Hell confound you! Suspect me of cutting trees, *me* the honestest woman in the place, and hunt me down like vermin! I should like to see you lose your cursed eyes! and then there would be peace again in the countryside. You bring bad luck, every one of you, you and your mates, making up shameful stories to stir up strife between your master and us——'

The forester submitted while the justice's clerk cleared the ashes from his eyes, and bathed them, demonstrating all the while that his patient had put himself in the wrong as to the law.

'The harridan! She had tired us out,' Vatel said at last; 'she has been in the wood ever since it was light——'

Meanwhile the stolen goods were concealed, the whole family lent a hand, and in a trice everything in the

tavern was in its place again. This done, Tonsard came to the door and took a high and mighty tone.

'Vatel, sonny, the next time you take it into your head to force your way into my house, my gun will have something to say to you. You have had the ashes this time, you may catch a sight of the fire next. You don't know your business.—You are feeling warm after this; if you would like a glass of wine, they'll bring one for you; you can see for yourself if there is a scrap of live wood in my mother's faggot, it is all sticks.'

'Scum of the earth!' ejaculated the forester for Brunet's benefit, more hurt in his mind by that piece of irony than by the ashes in his eyes.

Just at that moment Charles, the man who had been sent in search of Blondet, appeared at the gate.

'Why, what is the matter, Vatel?' cried he.

'Oh!' answered the forester, drying his eyes, which he had been dipping wide open in the stream for a final cleansing, 'I have some debtors up there; I will make them curse the day when they first saw the light.'

'If that is the way you take it, Monsieur Vatel,' said Tonsard coolly, 'you will find out that we Burgundians are no milksops.'

Vatel went off. Charles, but little curious to know the meaning of the enigma, looked in at the tavern door.

'Come up to the château, you and your otter, if you have one,' said he to old Fourchon.

The old man hastily rose and followed Charles.

'Look here now, where is that otter of yours?' asked Charles, smiling incredulously.

'Over here,' said the other, turning towards the Thune. The Thune was a little stream formed by the overflow of the millstream and the rivulets in the park at the Aigues. The Thune flows by the side of the road until it reaches the little lake at Soulanges, pouring into it on one side, and out at the other, turning the mills at

Soulanges, filling the ponds by the château, and finally joining the Avonne again.

'There she is. I hid her in the bottom of the stream at the Aigues with a stone tied to her neck.'

As the old man stooped and raised himself again, he missed the five-franc piece from his pocket; such a coin was there so seldom that he missed the novel sensation at once.

'Oh! the rascals!' he cried, 'I snare otters, and they snare their father, they do! They take all that I make from me, and tell me that it is for my benefit. Oh, I believe them, when they talk about my benefit. If it weren't for poor Mouche, the comfort of my old age, I would go and drown myself. Children are the ruin of their fathers.—You are not married, are you, Monsieur Charles? Never marry, and then you won't have to repent of breeding bad blood. And I thinking that now I could buy some tow! There's my tow slipped through my fingers. That gentleman, and a nice gentleman he is, gave me ten francs. Well, for one thing, my otter has gone up in value now since this happened.'

Charles put so little belief in Daddy Fourchon, that he took these lamentations, which for once were full of a very real feeling, for part of the preparation of a 'try on,' as he called it, in the language of the servants' hall, and he made a blunder by betraying his opinion in a smile, which the spiteful old man saw at once.

'Look here, Daddy Fourchon, you must behave yourself, eh? You will speak to madame in a moment,' said Charles, who noticed the profusion of brilliant carbuncles on the old man's nose and cheeks.

'I know what I am about, Charles, as you shall see. And if you will undertake to give me some of the scraps left over from breakfast, and a couple of bottles of Spanish wine in the kitchen, I will tell you in three words how to escape a drubbing——'

'Tell me, and François shall have the master's orders to give you a glass of wine,' said the footman.

'Is it a bargain?'

'A bargain.'

'All right. You shall have a word or two with Catherine under the bridge over the Avonne. Godain is in love with her, he has seen you together, and he is stupid enough to be jealous. Stupid, I say, because a peasant has no business with sentiment, that is for rich people. So if you go to Soulanges for a dance with her at the Tivoli on the *fête* day, you will be made to dance more than you think for! Godain is miserly, and has a nasty temper; he is just the one to break your arm, and you could not summons him for it——'

'Too dear! Catherine is a fine girl, but she is not worth *that*,' said Charles. 'And what makes Godain take it amiss? The others don't.'

'Oh! he is enough in love with her to marry her.'

'There is a woman that will be beaten!' said Charles.

'That is as may be,' returned the grandfather. 'Tonsard never lifted a hand against her mother, so frightened he was that she should go off and leave him, and Catherine takes after her mother. A wife that can bestir herself is worth a good deal.—And besides, at a game of hot cockles with Catherine, Godain, strong though he is, would not come off best.'

'Wait, Daddy Fourchon, here are forty sous for you to drink to my health in case we mayn't be able to get a sup of Alicante.'

Old Fourchon looked away as he pocketed the money, lest Charles should see the ironical glee in his eyes, which he could not hide.

'Catherine is a rare wench for a glass,' said the old man; 'she is fond of malaga; you ought to tell her to come to the Aigues for some, you ninny!'

Charles looked at old Fourchon with undisguised admiration; how should he guess how immensely im-

portant it was to the General's enemies to introduce one more spy into the house.

'The General must be pleased,' the old man went on; 'the peasants are keeping very quiet. What does he say about it? Is he still quite satisfied with Sibilet?'

'Nobody gives Sibilet any trouble except Michaud; they say he will contrive to make him lose his place.'

'Two of a trade!' commented old Fourchon. 'I'll lay to it that you yourself would be glad to see François turned off to step into his place.'

'Lord, François gets twelve hundred francs,' said Charles; 'but they won't turn him away, he knows the General's secrets——'

'Just as Ma'am Michaud knew my lady's, eh?' said Fourchon, eyeing Charles keenly. 'Look here, my lad, do you know whether the General and my lady have rooms apart?'

'Of course, or the master would not be so fond of madame as he is.'

'Don't you know any more?' asked Fourchon, but no more could be said, for by this time the pair were under the kitchen windows.

V

THE ENEMIES FACE TO FACE

As soon as breakfast was begun, François, the first valet-de-chambre, came to Blondet, saying in a low voice, but quite loud enough to be overheard by the Count, 'Fourchon's little boy says that they caught the otter at last, sir, and he wants to know if you would like to have the animal before taking it to the sub-prefect at Ville-aux-Fayes.'

Émile Blondet, past master in mystification, flushed

red in spite of himself, like a girl who hears an equivocal anecdote, and understands the drift of it.

'Aha! you have been out otter-hunting with old Fourchon this morning!' cried the General, bursting into a roar of laughter.

'What is it?' asked the Countess, disconcerted by her husband's hilarity.

'When a clever man like Blondet lets old Fourchon take him in, an old Cuirassier need not blush to have gone hunting that same otter, who looks uncommonly like the third horse which you never see and always pay for when you travel post.'

And in a voice broken by peals of laughter, the General managed to add, 'After that, I do not wonder that you changed your boots and trousers, you must have been made to swim.—As for me, I was not hoaxed quite so far as you—I stopped on the bank—but then you are so much cleverer than I am——'

'You forget, dear, that I do not know what you are talking about,' put in Mme. de Montcornet, with a trace of pique, caused by Blondet's confusion. At this the General recovered his gravity, and Blondet himself told the story of his otter hunt.

'But if they really have an otter,' said the Countess, 'they are not so much to blame, poor things.'

'Yes; only no one has seen the otter for these ten years!' returned the pitiless General.

'M. le Comte,' said François, 'the child vows and declares that he has caught one——'

'If they have an otter, I will pay them for it,' said the General.

'Providence can never have condemned the Aigues to be without otters for ever,' put in the Abbé Brossette.

'Oh, M. le Curé, if you let loose Providence upon us——' exclaimed Blondet.

'But who can have come?' the Countess asked quickly.

'Mouche, my lady, the little boy that always goes about with old Fourchon,' the servant answered.

'Send him in—if madame has no objection,' said the General. 'He will perhaps amuse you.'

'But at any rate we ought to know what to believe, ought we not?' asked the Countess.

A few moments later Mouche appeared in his almost naked condition. At this apparition of poverty personified in the splendid dining-room, when the price of a single mirror on the walls would have been a fortune to the barefooted, bare-legged, bare-headed child, it was impossible not to give way to charitable impulses. Mouche's eyes, like glowing coals, gazed from the glories of the room to the riches on the table.

'You have no mother, of course?' said the Countess, unable to explain such destitution in any other way.

'No, my lady; mammy died of fretting because daddy went for a soldier in 1812, and she never saw him again; he did not marry her with the papers before he went, and he was frozen, saving your presence. But I have my grandad Fourchon, who is very good to me, though he does beat me now and again like a Jesus.'

'How does it happen, dear, that any one on your land is so wretched?' asked the Countess, looking at the General.

'No one need be wretched here, Madame la Comtesse, unless they choose,' said the curé. 'M. le Comte means well by them, but you have to do with a people without religion, people who have but one idea—how to live at your expense.'

'But, my dear curé,' said Blondet, 'you are here to keep them in order.'

'My lord Bishop sent me here as a missionary among heathen, monsieur,' said the Abbé Brossette; 'but, as I had the honour of pointing out to him, our heathen in France are unapproachable; they make it a rule not to

listen to us; now in America you can appeal to the savages.'

'M'sieu le Curé, they do a little for me now, but if I went to your church they would give over helping me altogether. I should have them calling "shovel hats" after me.'

'But religion ought to begin by giving him trousers, my dear Abbé,' said Blondet. 'Do not your missions begin by coaxing the savage?'

'He would have sold his clothes before long,' the Abbé answered, lowering his voice, 'and my stipend does not allow me to traffic in souls in that way.'

'M. le Curé is right,' said the General, who was looking at Mouche. The urchin's tactics consisted in feigning ignorance whenever he had the worst of it.

'The little rascal is evidently intelligent enough to know right from wrong,' continued the General. 'He is old enough to work, and his one thought is how to transgress and escape punishment. He is well known to the foresters. Before I was mayor he knew, young as he was, that if a man is witness of a trespass on his own land, he cannot lodge a complaint himself, and he would brazenly stay in my meadows grazing his cows under my eyes; now, he makes off.'

'Oh! that is very wrong,' said the Countess; 'we ought not to take other people's goods, dear child.'

'One must eat, my lady. Grandad gives me more cuffs than crusts, and it makes you feel hollow inside, does a hiding. When the cows have milk, I help myself to a little, and that keeps life in me. Is his lordship so poor that he can't spare a little grass so that I may drink?'

'Why, perhaps he has had nothing to eat to-day,' said the Countess, touched by such dire poverty. 'Just let him have some bread and the rest of the fowl; give him some breakfast in fact,' she said, looking at the servant.—'Where do you sleep?' she added.

'Anywhere, wherever they will let us sleep in the winter, my lady, and out of doors in the summer.'

'How old are you?'

'Twelve.'

'Then something might be made of him yet,' said the Countess, turning to her husband.

'Might make a soldier,' said the General gruffly; 'he is in good training for it. I myself have been through quite as much of that sort of thing as he has, and yet here I am.'

'Asking your pardon, General, I am not on the register,' said the child. 'I shall not be drawn. My poor mother was not married, and I was born out in the fields; I am a son of the *airth*, as grandad says. Mammy saved me from the militia. I don't call myself Mouche any more than anything else. Grandad showed me plainly where I was well off. The Government haven't got me on their *papers*, and when I am old enough to be drawn I shall go on my travels through France. They won't catch *me*!'

'Do you love your grandfather?' asked the Countess, trying to read the heart of twelve years old.

'Lord, he cuffs me whenever the fit takes him, but there is no help for it. He is so funny, such a good sort! And then he says that he is taking pay for teaching me to read and write.'

'Can you read?' asked the Count.

'I should think I could, M. le Comte, and fine writing too! true as it is that we have an otter!'

'What is this?' the Count asked, holding out a newspaper.

'The *Cu-o-ti-dienne*,' pronounced Mouche, without stumbling more than three times over the word. Everybody, even the Abbé Brossette, joined in the laugh that followed.

'Well,' cried Mouche sulkily, 'you are setting me to read them newspapers, and grandad says that they are

written for rich people, but you always get to know later on what there is inside them.'

'The child is right, General; he makes me long to meet the man who got the better of me this morning once again,' said Blondet; 'I see that there was a touch of Mouche in his hoax.'

Mouche understood perfectly well that he was there for the master's amusement. Old Fourchon's scholar showed himself worthy of his master; he began to cry.

'How can you make fun of a barefooted child?' asked the Countess.

'A child who thinks it quite natural that his grandfather should take his pay for his schooling in slaps?' asked Blondet.

'Poor little one, look here,' said the lady; 'have you caught an otter?'

'Yes, my lady, as true as that you are the prettiest lady I have seen or ever shall see,' said the child, wiping away his tears.

'Just let us see this otter,' said the General.

'Oh, M'sieu le Comte, grandad hid her away; but she was still kicking when we were at the rope walk. You can send for my grandad, for he wants to sell her himself.'

'Take him to the kitchen and give him his breakfast, and send Charles for old Fourchon meanwhile,' the Countess bade François. 'And see if you can find some shoes and trousers and a jacket for the boy. Those who come here naked must go away again clothed——'

'God bless you, dear lady,' said Mouche as he went. 'M'sieu le Curé may be sure that the clothes *you* give me will be laid up for high days and holidays.'

Émile and Mme. de Montcornet exchanged glances. This last remark surprised them. 'That boy is not so silly,' their looks seemed to tell the curé.

'Certainly, madame,' said the curé as soon as the boy had gone, 'you cannot call a reckoning with poverty.

To my thinking, the poor have justifications which God alone can see and take into account, justifications in physical causes which often produce baleful results, and other justifications springing from character, produced by tendencies, blameworthy as we think, but yet the result of qualities which, unfortunately for society, find no outlet. The miracles worked on battlefields have taught us that the lowest scoundrel may have the makings of a hero in him. . . . But here you are placed in a very unusual position; and if reflection does not keep pace with benevolence, you run the risk of subsidising your enemies——'

'*Enemies?*' echoed the Countess.

'Bitter enemies,' the General spoke gravely.

'Old Fourchon and his son-in-law Tonsard represent the whole intelligence of the poorest folk in the valley; their advice is asked and taken in the most trifling matters. Their Machiavelism reaches an incredible pitch. You may take this for granted, that ten peasants in a wineshop are the small change for a big intrigue——'

As he was speaking, François announced M. Sibilet.

'This is the minister of finance,' said the General, smiling; 'send him in.—He will explain the gravity of the situation to you,' he added, glancing from his wife to Blondet.

'And so much the better in that he will scarcely make the least of it,' said the curé, in a scarcely audible voice.

Blondet saw for the first time a personage whose acquaintance he wished to make—the steward of the Aigues, of whom he had heard much since his arrival. Sibilet was a man of thirty or thereabouts; he was of middle height, with a sullen, unpleasant face, which a laugh seemed to suit ill. The eyes of changing green, under an anxious brow, looked different ways, and thus disguised his thoughts. His long, straight hair gave him a somewhat clerical appearance; he wore a brown great-

coat and a black waistcoat and trousers; he was knock-kneed, and the trousers imperfectly concealed this defect. In spite of his unwholesome appearance, sallow complexion, and flabby muscles, Sibilet had a strong constitution. The somewhat gruff tones of his voice harmonised with the generally unprepossessing appearance of the man.

Blondet and the Abbé Brossette exchanged a furtive glance, and in the fleeting expression in the eyes of the young ecclesiastic Blondet read the confirmation of his own suspicions.

'You set down the peasants' thefts at about one-fourth the value of the yearly returns, do you not, my dear Sibilet?' asked the General.

'At a good deal more than that, M. le Comte,' returned the steward. 'Your paupers take more than the Government asks of you. There is a young rogue called Mouche who gleans his two bushels per day; and old women, whom any one would think at their last gasp, will recover health and youth and the use of their limbs at harvest-time. That is a phenomenon which you can see for yourself,' continued Sibilet, turning to Blondet, 'for we shall begin in six days' time; the rain in July has made the harvest late this year. We shall be cutting the rye next week. Nobody ought to glean without a certificate of poverty from the mayor of the commune, and a commune ought on no account to allow any but the very poor to glean at all, but all the communes in the district glean over each other without certificates. For sixty poor people in the commune, there are forty more who will not do a day's work; and, as a matter of fact, even those who have set up for themselves will leave their work to glean in the fields or the vineyards.

'Here these folk will pick up three hundred bushels a day among them, and the harvest lasts a fortnight—four thousand five hundred bushels taken away in the canton. So the gleaning amounts to about one-tenth of the whole

harvest; and as to the abuse of grazing, that makes a hole in our profits, about a sixth of the value of our meadows goes in that way. Then there are the woods, they do incalculable mischief there, cutting down the young saplings six years old.—The damage done to your estate, M. le Comte, mounts up to twenty and some odd thousand francs per annum.'

'Well, madame,' said the General, 'do you hear that?'

'Is it not exaggerated?' asked Mme. de Montcornet.

'No, unhappily it is not, madame,' said the curé. 'There is poor Father Niseron, the white-haired old man who unites in person all the offices of bellringer, beadle, sexton, sacristan, and chanter, in spite of his republican opinions—in fact, he is the grandfather of that little Geneviève whom you placed under Mme. Michaud——'

'La Péchina!' said Sibilet, interrupting the Abbé.

'La Péchina?' asked the Countess. 'What do you mean?'

'Mme. la Comtesse, when you saw little Geneviève by the wayside looking so forlorn, you exclaimed in Italian: *Piccina!* And now it has become a nickname, and so corrupted that the whole commune knows your protégée by the name of the *Péchina*. She is the only one who comes to church, poor little thing, with Mme. Michaud and Mme. Sibilet,' added the curé.

'Yes, and she is none the better off for that,' said the steward. 'She is persecuted for her religion.'

'Well,' continued the curé, 'this poor old man of seventy-two picks up a bushel and a half in a day, and does it honestly moreover, but he is too conscientious to sell his gleanings as the rest of them do; he keeps the corn for his own consumption. As a favour to me, M. Langlumé, your deputy, grinds his corn for nothing, and my servant bakes his bread with mine.'

'I had forgotten my little protégée,' said the Countess, startled by Sibilet's remarks.—'Your coming has put other things out of my head,' she added, turning to

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Blondet. 'But after breakfast we will go to the Avonne gate, and I will show you a living woman like a fifteenth century painter's dream.'

As she spoke, a pair of cracked sabots was put down with a clatter at the kitchen door, and old Fourchon was announced by François. The Countess nodded permission, and François brought the old man into the room, Mouche following behind with his mouth full, and holding the otter by a string tied to its yellow paws, ribbed like a duck's foot. Old Fourchon glanced at the gentry seated at table, gave Sibilet the half-defiant, half-servile look that veils a peasant's thoughts; then he brandished the amphibian triumphantly.

'Here she is!' he cried, looking at Blondet.

'That is my otter though,' demurred the Parisian; 'I paid plenty for it.'

'Oh, your otter got away, my dear sir!' retorted old Fourchon. 'She is in her hole at this minute; she had no mind to come out of it; she was the female, while this here is the male! Mouche saw it come out, a long way off, after you had gone. 'Tis as true as that M. le Comte covered himself with glory along with his Cuirassiers at Waterloo! The otter is as much mine as the Aigues belongs to his lordship the General. . . . But for twenty francs the otter is yours, otherwise I will take it to our *sub-perfect*. If M. Gourdon thinks it too dear, as we went hunting together this morning, I give the gentleman from Paris the preference, as is but fair.'

'Twenty francs!' put in Blondet. 'In plain French, that is not exactly what you might call giving me the preference.'

'Eh! my dear sir,' cried the old man, 'I know so little French, that if you like I will ask you for them in Burgundian; it's all one to me so long as I get the francs, I will speak Latin: *latinus*, *latina*, *latinum*. After all, it is only what you promised me yourself this morning; and besides, my children have taken your

money from me already; I cried about it as I came along. You ask Charles—I don't like to summons them for ten francs and publish their bad doings at the court. As soon as I make a few sous they get them away from me by making me drink.—It is hard that I can't go to take a glass of wine in my own daughter's house, but that is what children are in these days!—That is what comes of the Revolution; it's everything for the children now, and their fathers are put upon. Ah! I am eddicating Mouche here in quite another way. The little rapscallion is fond of me,' he remarked, administering a slap to his grandson.

'It looks to me as if you were making him into a petty thief, just like the rest of them,' said Sibilet, 'for he never lies down without something on his conscience.'

'Oh! Master Sibilet, his conscience is easier than what yours is! . . . Poor child, what does he take? A trifle of grass, that is better than throttling a man! Lord, he doesn't know mathematics like you; he doesn't understand subtraction and addition and multiplication. . . . You do us a lot of harm, you do! You tell people that we are a pack of brigands, and you are at the bottom of the division between his lordship there, who is a good man, and the rest of us, who are good folk. There ain't a better place than this is.

'Look here! Have we money coming in? Don't we go without clothes to our backs, as you may say, Mouche and I? Fine sheets we sleep in, bleached in the dew every morning; and unless you grudge us the air we breathe, and the light of the sun, and our drink, there is nothing that I see that any one can want to take from us! The bourgeois do their robberies in the chimney corner, and it pays much better than picking up things that lie about in corners of the wood. There are no foresters nor mounted keepers for Master Gaubertin, who came here bare as a worm, and has two million francs this day.

'"Thieves!" is soon said; but there is old Guerbet, as collects the taxes, has gone out of our villages at night with his receipts these fifteen years, and nobody has ever asked him for two farthings. That is not the way in a country of thieves. We are not much the richer for theft. Just show me this—whether it is we or you who live by doing nothing?'

'If you had not been idle, you would have something to live on,' said the curé. 'God blesses work.'

'I don't like to contradict you, Môsieur l'Abbé, for you know more than I do, and perhaps you can explain this to me. Here am I, am I not? A lazy, idle sot, a good-for-nothing of an old Fourchon, who has had some education, has been a farmer, fell into difficulties, and nevet got out of them! . . . Well, now, where is the difference between me and that good, honest old man Niseron, a vinedresser, seventy years old (for he and I are of an age), who has been digging the soil? up before daylight every morning to go to his work, till he has a a body like iron and a noble soul. I see that he is just as poor as I am. There is La Péchina, his granddaughter, gone out to service with Ma'am Michaud, while my little Mouche is free as the air! Is the poor old man rewarded for his virtues in the same way that I am punished for my vices? He does not know what a glass of wine is; he is as sober as an apostle; he digs graves for the dead, and I set the living a-dancing. He has dined with Duke Humphrey, while I have tippled down the liquor like a rollicking devil-may-care creature. And one has come just as far as the other; we have the same snow on our heads, the same cash in our pockets, he rings the bell, and I make the rope. He is a Republican, and I am a sinner, and not even a publican. Let the peasant do ill or well, according to your notions, he will end as he began, in rags, and you in fine linen——'

Nobody interrupted old Fourchon, who seemed to

owe his eloquence to the bottled wine; at the outset Sibilet tried to cut him short, but at a sign from Blondet the steward was dumb. The curé, the General, and the Countess gathered from the journalist's glances that he wished to study the problem of pauperism from the life, and perhaps to be quits with old Fourchon.

'And what do you mean about Mouche's education? How do you set to work to bring him up to be a better child to you than your daughters?'

'Does he so much as speak to him of God?' asked the curé.

'Oh! not I, Môsieur le Curé, I be'ant telling him to fear God, but *men*. God is good, and has promised, according to you parsons, that we shall have the kingdom of heaven, as the rich keep the kingdom of earth. I say to him—"Mouche! fear the jail! for you go out of jail to the scaffold. Never steal anything; make them give you what you want! Stealing leads to murder, and murder brings down the justice of men on you. The razor of justice—that is to be feared; it secures the rich man's slumber against the poor man that lies awake. Learn to read. Education will put it in your power to make money under cover of the law, like clever M. Gaubertin. You will be a steward, eh! like M. Sibilet, whom his lordship the Count allows his rations. The great thing is to keep well with the rich; there are crumbs under rich men's tables. That is what I call a fine education, and thorough too. So the young whelp keeps on this side of the law. He will be a steady boy; he will take care of me!'

'And what will you make of him?' inquired Blondet.

'A gentleman's servant, to begin with,' answered Fourchon, 'because seeing the masters from near, his education will be thoroughly finished, that it will! Good example will teach him to make his way with the law to back him like the rest of you! . . . If his lordship will take him into his stables to learn to rub down

the horses, the little fellow will be very much pleased—seeing that though he fears men, he is not afraid of animals.'

'You are a clever man, Daddy Fourchon,' began Blondet. 'You know quite well what you are saying, and there is some sense in what you say.'

'Oh! my certy! no, I have left my senses at the *Grand-I-Vert* along with my two five-franc pieces.'

'How came such a man as you to drift into such poverty? For as things are now, a peasant has only himself to thank if he does badly; he is free, he can become rich. It is not as it used to be any longer. If a peasant can scrape a little money together, he finds a bit of land, he can buy it, and he is his own master.'

'I saw the old times, and I see the new, my dear learned sir,' replied Fourchon; 'they have put up a new signboard, but the liquor is the same as ever. To-day is only yesterday's younger brother. There! you put that in your paper! Enfranchised, are we? We still belong to the same village, and the *seigneur* is there still; I call him Hard Labour.—The hoe, which is all our property, has not passed out of our hands. And anyhow, whether we work for the *seigneur* or for the tax collector, who takes the best part of what we make, we have to sweat our lives out——'

'But why not choose a handicraft and try your luck elsewhere?' asked Blondet.

'Are you talking to me of setting out to seek my fortune?—But where should I go? I must have a passport, which costs forty sous, before I can go out of the department. These forty years I have not been able to hear a slut of a two-franc piece jangle with another in my pocket. If you go straight before you, for every village you come to you want a three-franc piece, and there are not many of the Fourchon family that have the wherewithal to visit six villages! Nothing drags us from our communes except the conscription. And what

does the army do for us? The colonel lives on the common soldier as the master lives on the labourer. Does one colonel out of a hundred spring from our loins? In the army, as in the rest of the world, for one that grows rich a hundred drop out. For want of what? God knows—so do the money-lenders.

'So the best thing we can do is to stop in our communes, where we are penned up like sheep by the force of circumstances, just as we used to be by the *seigneurs*. And I care not a rap who nails me here. Nailed down by necessity, or nailed down by the nobles, we are condemned for life to labour on the soil. Wherever we are, we turn up the soil, and dig it and dung it, and work for you that are born rich, as we are born poor. The mass will always be the same; what it is, it always is. Those of us who go up in the world are fewer than those of you who come down. We know this very well, if we haven't book learning, that it won't do to be down upon us at every moment. We leave you in peace; let us live. Otherwise, if this goes on, you will be forced to feed us in your prisons, where we are far more comfortable than on our straw.—You are our masters, and you mean to remain so; we shall always be enemies, to-day as for these last thirty years. You have everything, we have nothing, so you cannot expect us to be your friends yet.'

'That is what is called a declaration of war,' said the General.

'When the Aigues belonged to the poor lady that is gone (the Lord have mercy on her soul, for she was a wanton singer in her youth) we were well off, your lordship. Her let us pick up a living in her fields, and take our firing in her forests; her was none the poorer for that! And you, that are at least as rich as she was, hunt us down like wild beasts, nor more nor less, and drag the poor people before the magistrate. Ah, well! no good will come of that. You will have some ugly doings laid at your door. I have just seen your forester, that cur-

mudgeon of a Vatel, all but kill a poor old woman about a stick of firewood. They will make an enemy of the people of you; they will grow bitter against you at 'up-sittings' as they work and talk; they will curse you as heartily as they used to bless madame that is gone. The poor man's curse grows, your lordship; it grows higher than the biggest of your oak-trees, and the oak-tree grows into the gallows-tree. . . . Nobody here tells you the truth; this is truth that I am telling you! Death may come to me any morning; I have not much to lose by letting you have the truth for less than market price. . . . I play tunes along with Vermichel for the peasants to dance to at the Café de la Paix at Soulanges; I hear their talk. Well, then, there is a bad feeling towards you; they will make the country too hot to hold you. If your damned Michaud doesn't turn over a new leaf, they will force you to turn him away! There, now! the advice and the otter are cheap at twenty francs——'

As old Fourchon delivered himself of these final remarks, a man's footsteps sounded outside, and the object of his menaces suddenly appeared unannounced. It was easy to see that the threat had reached Michaud's ears from the look which he gave the orator of the poor. Old Fourchon's impudence forsook him; he looked like a thief confronted with the policeman. He knew that he had made a mistake, and that Michaud had, as it were, a right to call him to account, for an outpouring evidently meant to intimidate the dwellers at the Aigues.

'Behold the minister of war,' said the General, addressing Blondet, with a gesture that indicated Michaud.

'I beg your pardon, madame, for coming into the room without asking your leave,' remarked the minister, 'but I must speak to the General on urgent business.'

While Michaud made his apologies he watched Sibilet. The joy of the man's heart at Fourchon's bold tone

expanded over his visage, unnoticed by any of those who sat at the table, who were interested in no small degree by the otter hunter. But Michaud, who, for reasons of his own, was always on the watch with Sibilet, was struck with the expression of the steward's face.

'He has certainly earned his twenty francs, as he says, M. le Comte,' cried Sibilet; 'the otter is not dear.'

'Give him twenty francs,' said the General, addressing his valet.

'Are you really taking it from me?' Blondet asked him.

'I will have the animal stuffed,' cried the Count.

'Oh! your lordship, that kind gentleman would have let me have the skin!' protested old Fourchon.

'Very well,' said the Countess. 'You shall have five francs for the skin, but you can go now——'

The strong, rank odour of the two dwellers on the high road tainted the air of the room, and so offended Mme. de Montcornet's delicate senses, that if the pair had stayed there much longer the lady would have been obliged to go. It was solely to this inconvenient quality that Fourchon owed his twenty-five francs. He went out, still eyeing Michaud fearfully, and making him obeisances without end.

'What I been telling his lordship, Môsieu Michaud,' said he, 'was for your good.'

'Or for the good of them that you take pay of,' said Michaud, looking him through and through.

'Bring coffee and leave us,' the General ordered; 'and before all things, shut the doors.'

Blondet had not yet seen the head-forester at the Aigues; his first impression was very different from that just made upon him by Sibilet. Michaud inspired confidence and esteem as great as the repulsion excited by Sibilet.

The head-forester's face caught your attention at once by its shapely outlines—the oval contours were as

delicately moulded as the profile, a regularity of feature seldom found in an ordinary Frenchman. Yet, in spite of this regularity of feature, the face was not lacking in character, perhaps by reason of its harmonious colouring, in which red and tawny tints prevailed, indications of physical courage. The clear, brown eyes were bright and keen, unfaltering in the expression of thought, and looked you straight in the face. The broad, open brow was set still further in relief by thick, black hair. There was a wrinkle here and there, traced by the profession of arms, on the fine face lit up by loyalty, decision, and self-reliance. If any doubt or suspicion entered his mind, it could be read there at once. His figure, still slender and shapely, as is the case with the men picked out for a crack regiment of cavalry, was such that the head-forester might be described as a strapping fellow. Michaud kept his moustaches, whiskers, and a beard beneath the chin; altogether, he recalled a military type which a deluge of patriotic prints and pictures has made almost ridiculous. The defect of the type is its over-abundance in the French army; but perhaps this uniformity of physiognomy has its origin in the continuity of emotions, the hardships of camp life, from which no rank is exempt, and the fact that the same efforts are made on the field of battle by officers and men alike.

Michaud was dressed in dark blue from head to foot; he still wore the black satin stock and soldiers' boots, just as he held himself somewhat stiffly, with his shoulders set back and chest expanded, as if he still bore arms. The red ribbon of the Legion of Honour adorned his buttonhole. And (to add a final trait of character to a sketch of the mere outside of the man) while the steward, since he had come into office, had never omitted the formula 'Monsieur le Comte' in addressing his patron, Michaud had never called his master by any name but 'the General.'

Once again Blondet exchanged a significant glance

with the Abbé Brossette. 'What a contrast!' he seemed to say, as he looked from the steward to the head-forester. Then, that he might learn whether the man's character, thoughts, and words were such as his face and stature might lead you to expect, he looked full at Michaud, saying—

'I say! I was out early this morning, and found your foresters still abed!'

'At what time?' asked the old soldier uneasily.

'At half-past seven.'

Michaud gave his General an almost mischievous glance.

'And through which gate did you go out?' asked Michaud.

'The Conches gate. The keeper in his shirt took a look at me from the window,' answered Blondet.

'Gaillard had just gone to bed, no doubt,' replied Michaud. 'When you told me that you had gone out early, I thought that you were up before sunrise, and if my forester had gone home so early, he must have been ill; but at half-past seven he would be going to bed.—We are up all night,' Michaud added, after a pause, by way of answer to a look of astonishment from the Countess; 'but this vigilance of ours is always at fault. You have just given twenty-five francs to a man who a few minutes ago was quietly helping to hide the traces of a theft committed on your property this very morning. In fact, as soon as the General is ready, we must talk it over, for something must be done——'

'You are always full of your rights, my dear Michaud, and *summum jus*, *summa injuria*. If you do not concede a point, you will make trouble for yourself,' said Sibilet. 'I could have liked you to hear old Fourchon talking just now when wine had loosened his tongue a little.'

'He frightened me!' exclaimed the Countess.

'He said nothing that I have not known for a long time,' said the General.

'Oh! the rascal was not drunk, he played a part, for whose benefit?—Perhaps you know?' Michaud suggested, looking steadily at Sibilet. The steward reddened under his gaze.

'*O rus!*' cried Blondet, looking out of the corner of his eye at the Abbé.

'The poor people suffer,' said the Countess; 'there was some truth in what old Fourchon has just shrieked at us, for it cannot be said that he *spoke*.'

'Madame,' answered Michaud, 'do you think that the Emperor's soldiers lay in roses for fourteen years? The General is a count, he is a Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour, he has had grants of land made him; do I show any jealousy of him, I that have fought as he has? Have I any wish to cavil at his fame, to steal his land, or to refuse him the honour due to his rank?—The peasant ought to obey as the soldier obeys; he should have a soldier's loyalty, his respect for privileges won by other men, and try to rise to be an officer, by fair means, by his own exertions, and not by knavery. The sword and the ploughshare are twin brothers. And in the soldier's lot there is one thing that the peasant has not: death hovering overhead at every hour.'

'That is what I should like to tell them from the pulpit,' cried the Abbé Brossette.

'Concessions?' the head-forester went on, in answer to Sibilet's challenge. 'I would concede quite ten per cent on the gross returns from the Aigues, but the way things go now, the General loses thirty per cent; and if M. Sibilet is paid so much per cent on the receipts, I do not understand his concessions, for he pretty benevolently submits to a loss of ten or twelve hundred francs a year.

'My dear M. Michaud,' retorted Sibilet in a surly tone, 'I have told M. le Comte that I would rather lose twelve hundred francs than my life. Think it seriously over; I keep on telling you——

'*Life!*' cried the Countess; 'can it be a question of any one's life?'

'We ought not to discuss affairs of the State here,' said the General, laughing.—'All this means, madame, that Sibilet, in his quality of finance minister, is timid and cowardly, while my minister of war is brave, and, like his General, fears nothing.'

'Say prudent, M. le Comte?' cried Sibilet.

'Come, now, are we really surrounded by snares set for us by savages like the heroes of Fenimore Cooper's novels in the backwoods of America?'

'Come! your statesmanship, gentlemen, consists in understanding how to govern without alarming us by the creaking of the machinery of Government,' said Mme. de Montcornet.

'Ah! Mme. la Comtesse, perhaps it is a needful thing that you should know what one of your pretty caps costs in sweat here,' said the curé.

'No, for then I might very well do without them, look respectfully at a five-franc piece, and grow a miser, as all country people do, and I should lose too much by it,' said the Countess, laughing.—'Here, my dear Abbé, give me your arm; let us leave the General with his two ministers, and go to the Avonne gate to see Mme. Michaud. I have not made a call upon her since I came; it is time to look after my little protégée.'

And the pretty woman went for thick shoes and a hat; Sibilet's fears, Mouche and Fourchon, their rags, and the hate in their eyes, were already forgotten.

The Abbé Brossette and Blondet, obedient to the mistress of the house, followed her out of the room, and waited for her on the terrace in front of the château.

'What do you think of all this?' Blondet asked his companion.

'I am a pariah. I am watched by spies as the common enemy. Every moment I am obliged to keep the ears

and eyes of prudence wide open, or I should fall into some of the snares they set so as to rid themselves of me,' said the officiating priest. 'Between ourselves, it has come to this, I ask myself whether they will not shoot me down——'

'And you stay on?' asked Blondet.

'A man no more deserts the cause of God than the cause of the Emperor!' the priest answered with a simplicity which impressed Blondet. He grasped the priest's hand cordially.

'So you must see,' the Abbé continued, 'that I am not in a position to know anything of all that is brewing. Still it seems to me that the people here have "a spite against" the General, as they say in Artois and Belgium.'

Something must here be said about the curé of Blangy.

The Abbé, the fourth son of a good middle-class family in Autun, was a clever man, carrying his head high on the score of his cloth. Short and thin though he was, he redeemed the insignificance of his appearance by that air of hard-headedness which sits not ill on a Burgundian. He had accepted a subordinate position through devotion, for his religious conviction had been backed by political conviction. There was something in him of the priest of other times; he had a passionate belief in the Church and his order; he looked at things as a whole, his ambition was untainted by selfishness. *Serve* was his motto, to serve the Church and the Monarchy at the point where danger threatens most, to serve in the ranks, like the soldier who feels within himself that his desire to acquit himself well and his courage must bring him sooner or later a General's command. He faltered in none of his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, acquitting himself in these respects, as in all the other duties of his position, with a simplicity and cheerfulness that is the unmistakable sign of an upright

nature, in which natural instincts make for right as well as strong and earnest religious conviction.

This remarkable churchman saw at the first glance that Blondet was attracted to the Countess, saw also that with a daughter of the house of Troisville, and a man of letters, who supported the Monarchy, it behoved him to show himself a man of the world, for the dignity of the cloth. He came to make a fourth at whist almost every evening. Emile Blondet was able to appreciate the Abbé Brossette, and paid him marked deference, so that the two men felt attracted to each other; for every clever man is delighted to meet with an equal, or, if you prefer it, an audience, and there is a natural affinity between sword and scabbard.

'But now, M. l'Abbé, you whose earnestness has placed you below your proper level, what, in your opinion, has brought about this state of things?'

'I do not like to give you platitudes after that flattering parenthesis,' said the Abbé, smiling. 'The things that are happening in this valley are happening everywhere in France. It is all the outcome of the hopes and tendencies of 1789; they have filtered down, so to speak, into the peasants' minds. The Revolution affected some districts much more deeply than others; and in this strip of Burgundy lying so near to Paris, the significance of that movement was felt to be the triumph of the Gaul over the Frank. Historically, the peasants are still on the morrow of the Jacquerie; their defeat sank deeply into their minds. The facts have been long forgotten, but the idea has become instinctive in them. It is as much in the blood of the peasant as pride of birth was once in the blood of the noble. So the Revolution of 1789 was the revenge of the vanquished. The peasants have entered upon the ownership of the soil, a possession forbidden to them by feudal law for twelve hundred years. Hence their love of the land; they divide it up among them till a single furrow is cut in half. It not seldom

happens that they pay no taxes, for the property is so exceedingly small that it will not cover the costs of prosecution for arrears.'

'Their wrongheadedness, their suspiciousness, if you will,' Blondet broke in upon the Abbé, 'in this respect is so great that in a thousand cantons out of three thousand in France, it is impossible for a rich man to buy land of a peasant. They will let or sell their bits of ground among themselves, but they will not give it up to a well-to-do farmer on any consideration whatever. The more the great landowner offers, the more their vague suspicions increase. Expropriation is the only means by which the peasant's holdings can be brought under the common law of the land. Plenty of people have noticed this fact, but they see no reason for it.'

'This is the reason,' said the Abbé Brossette, rightly considering that with Blondet a pause was a sort of interrogation. 'Twelve centuries are as nothing to a caste which has never been diverted from its principal idea by the historical spectacle of civilisation, a caste which still proudly wears the noble's broad-brimmed silk-bound hat since the day when it fell out of fashion and was abandoned to the peasants. The enthusiasm in the depths of the hearts of the people, which centred itself passionately on the figure of Napoleon (who never understood the secret of it as thoroughly as he imagined), sprang solely from this idea, which may perhaps explain the portent of his return in 1815—Napoleon, bound to the people by a million of common soldiers (first and last), is even yet, in their eyes, the king of the people, sprung from the loins of the Revolution, the man who confirmed them in the possession of the National lands. The oil at his coronation was saturated with this idea——'

'An idea which the year 1814 disturbed with unfortunate results, an idea which the Monarchy should

regard as sacred,' Blondet said quickly; 'for the people may find beside the throne a prince to whom his father left the head of Louis XVI. as part of his inheritance.'

'Hush, here comes the Countess,' said the Abbé Brossette. 'Fourchon frightened her, and we must keep her here in the interests of religion, of the throne, nay, of the country itself.'

Michaud, as head-forester, had doubtless come to report the injury done to Vatel's eyes. But before reporting the deliberations of the Council of State, the reader must be put in possession of a sequence of facts, a concise account of the circumstances under which the General bought the Aigues, and of the weighty reasons which determined Sibilet's appointment to the stewardship of the fine estate, together with an explanation of Michaud's installation as head-forester; in short, of all the antecedent facts that had brought people's minds into their present attitude, and given rise to the fears expressed by Sibilet.

There will be a further advantage in this rapid sketch, in that it will introduce several of the principal actors of the drama, give an outline of their interests, and set forth the dangers of the Comte de Montcornet's position.

VI

A TALE OF ROBBERS

In 1791, or thereabouts, Mlle. Laguerre came on a visit to her country house, and accepted as her new agent the son of an ex-steward of the neighbouring manor of Soulanges.

The little town of Soulanges at this day is simply the market-town of the district, though it was once the capital of a considerable county in the days when the

House of Burgundy waged war against the House of France. Ville-aux-Fayes, now the seat of the sub-prefecture, was a mere petty fief in those days, a dependency of Soulanges like the Aigues, Ronquerolles, Cerneux, Conches, and fifteen hamlets besides; but the Soulanges still bear a count's coronet, while the Ronquerolles of to-day styles himself "Marquis," thanks to the intrigues of a court which raised the son of a Captain du Plessis to a dukedom over the heads of the first families of the Conquest. Which shows that towns, like families, have their vicissitudes.

The ex-steward's son, a penniless bachelor, succeeded an agent enriched by the spoils of thirty years of office. The agent had decided that a third share in the firm of Minoret would suit him better than the stewardship of the Aigues. The future victualler had recommended as his successor a young man who had been his responsible assistant for five years. François Gaubertin should cover his retreat, and, indeed, his pupil undertook (out of gratitude for his training) to obtain the late agent's discharge from Mlle. Laguerre, when he saw how the lady went in terror of the Revolution.

Gaubertin senior, ex-steward of the manor of Soulanges, and public accuser of the department, took the timorous operatic singer under his protection. She was 'suspect' on the face of it, after her relations with the aristocracy; so the local Fouquier-Tinville got up a little comedy, an explosion of feeling against the stage-queen, in order to give his son a chance to play the part of deliverer. By these means, the young man obtained his predecessor's discharge, and citoyenne Laguerre made François Gaubertin her prime minister, partly out of gratitude, partly from policy.

The future victualler of the armies of the Republic had not spoiled mademoiselle. He annually remitted about thirty thousand livres to her in Paris, whereas the Aigues must have brought in forty thousand at the very

least. When, therefore, François Gaubertin promised her thirty-six thousand francs, the ignorant opera-girl was amazed.

If the fortune subsequently amassed by François Gaubertin is to be justified before the tribunal of probability, its history must be traced from the beginning. First of all, young Gaubertin obtained the post of mayor of Blangy through his father's influence; and thenceforward, in spite of the law, he demanded that all payments should be made to him in coin. It was in his power to strike any one down by the ruinous requisitions of the Republic, and he used his power to 'terrorise' his debtors (to use the language of the time). Then the steward punctually remitted his mistress's dues in *assignats*, so long as *assignats* were legal tender. If the finances of the country were the worse for the paper currency, at any rate it laid the foundation of many a private fortune.

In three years, between 1792 and 1795, young Gaubertin made a hundred and fifty thousand francs out of the Aigues, and speculated on the Paris money market. Mlle. Laguerre, embarrassed with her assignats, was obliged to coin money with her diamonds, hitherto useless. She sent them to Gaubertin, who sold them for her, and punctually remitted the money in coin. Mlle. Laguerre was so much touched by this piece of loyalty, that from that time forth her belief in Gaubertin was as firm as her belief in Piccini.

In 1796, at the time of his marriage with citoyenne Isaure Mouchon (a daughter of one of his father's old friends of the Convention), young Gaubertin possessed three hundred and fifty thousand francs in coin; and as the Directory seemed to him to be likely to last, he determined that Mlle. Laguerre should pass the accounts of his five years' stewardship before he married, finding an excuse in that event in his life for the request.

'I shall be the father of a family,' he said; 'you know the sort of character an agent gets; my father-in-law is

a Republican of Roman probity, and a man of influence moreover; I should like to show him that I am not unworthy of him.'

Mlle. Laguerre expressed her satisfaction with Gaubertin's accounts in the most flattering terms.

At first the steward tried to check the peasants' depredations, partly to inspire confidence in Mlle. Laguerre, partly because he feared (and not without reason) that the returns would suffer, and that there would be a serious falling off in the timber merchant's tips. But by that time the sovereign people had learned to make pretty free everywhere; and the lady of the manor, beholding her kings at such close quarters, felt somewhat overawed by majesty, and signified to her Richelieu that, before all things, she most particularly desired to die in peace. The prima donna's income was so far too large for her needs, that she suffered the most disastrous precedents. For instance, rather than take law proceedings, she allowed her neighbours to encroach upon her proprietor's rights. She never looked beyond the high walls of her park; she knew that nothing would pass them to trouble her felicity; she wished for nothing but a quiet life, like the true philosopher that she was. What were a few thousand livres of income, more or less, or rebates on sales of wood demanded by the merchants, on the ground that the peasants had spoiled the trees, in the eyes of a thriftless, reckless opera-girl, whose income of a hundred thousand francs had cost her nothing but pleasure, who had just submitted without a murmur to lose forty out of sixty thousand francs a year?

'Eh!' cried she, with the easy good-nature of an *impure* of the bygone eighteenth century, 'every one must live, even the Republic!'

Mlle. Cochet, terrible power, her woman and female vizier, had tried to open her mistress's eyes when she saw what an ascendency Gaubertin had gained over 'my

lady,' as he called her from the first, in spite of revolutionary laws of equality; but Gaubertin (in his turn) opened the waiting-maid's eyes by producing a document purporting to be a 'denunciation' sent to his father, the public accuser, wherein Mlle. Cochet was vehemently accused of being in correspondence with Pitt and Cobourg.

Thenceforward the two powers ruled with divided sway, but *à la Montgomery*—under the rose. La Cochet praised Gaubertin to Mlle. Laguerre, just as Gaubertin extolled La Cochet to his mistress. Moreover, the woman knew that her nest was feathered, and that she could sleep securely on her mistress's legacy of sixty thousand francs. Madame was so used to La Cochet that she could not do without her. The maid knew all the secrets of 'dear mistress's' toilet; she had the knack of sending 'dear mistress' to sleep of an evening with endless stories, and could waken her in the morning with flattering words. In fact, La Cochet never saw any change in 'dear mistress' till the day of her death, and when 'dear mistress' lay in her coffin, probably thought that she looked better than ever.

The annual gains made by this pair, together with their salaries and perquisites, grew to be so considerable, that the most affectionate relatives could not have been more attached than they to the excellent creature their mistress. Does any one yet know how well a knave can lull his dupe? No mother is so tender or so thoughtful for an idolised daughter as a practitioner of *tartufferie* for his milch cow. What limits are there to the success of *Tartufe* played on many a private stage? What is friendship in comparison? Molière died all too soon, he should have shown us the sequel—Orgon's despair, Orgon bored by his family and worried by his children, Orgon regretting Tartufe and his flatteries, muttering to himself, 'Those were the good times!'

During the last eight years of Mlle. Laguerre's life

she only received thirty out of the fifty thousand francs brought in by the Aigues. Gaubertin's reign ended in much the same way as the reign of his predecessor, though rents were higher and prices had risen notably between 1791 and 1815, and Mlle. Laguerre's estate increased by continued purchases. But it was part of Gaubertin's plan to inherit the estate on his mistress's approaching death, and therefore he was obliged to invent and maintain a chronic state of bad times. La Cochet, initiated into this scheme, was to share in the benefits.

Now the stage queen in exile possessed a supplementary income of twenty thousand livres from investments in consolidated government stock (note how admirably the language of politicians adapts itself to the humours of politics), and scarcely spent the aforesaid twenty thousand francs in a year, but she was amazed at the continual purchases of land made by the steward out of the surplus funds at his disposal. Never in her life before had she lived within her income ; and now that her needs had shrunk with age, she mistook the symptoms, and credited Gaubertin and La Cochet with honesty.

'Two treasures!' she assured every one who came to see her.

Gaubertin, moreover, was careful of appearances ; his accounts looked straightforward. All the rents were duly posted in the ledger ; anything that could not fail to strike the actress's slender intelligence was definite, accurate, and precise, so far as figures went. But the steward took a percentage on all outgoing expenses, bargains about to be concluded, exploitations, contracts for repairs, and lawsuits which he devised. His mistress never looked into these details, and so it not seldom happened that an arrangement was made by which the buyers paid double the prices entered, and were bound over to silence by receiving a share of the spoils. This easiness on Gaubertin's part won general popularity for him-

self, and every one praised his mistress; for besides being fleeced all round, she gave away a great deal of money.

'God preserve her, dear lady!' was the cry.

As a matter of fact, Mlle. Laguerre gave directly or indirectly to every one that asked of her. As a sort of Nemesis of youth, the opera singer was plundered in her age, so deftly and so systematically that her pillagers kept within certain bounds, lest her eyes should be opened to all that went on, and she should be frightened into selling the Aigues and going back to Paris.

It was (alas!) in the interest of such plunderers as these that Paul-Louis Courier was murdered. He had made the blunder of announcing beforehand that he meant to take his wife away and sell his estate, on which many a Tourangeau Tonsard was living. With this fear before their eyes, the marauders at the Aigues only cut down young trees when driven to extremities, when, for instance, there were no branches left which they could reach with a bill-hook tied to a pole. For the sake of their own ill-gotten gains, they did not go out of their way to do damage; and yet, during the last years of Mlle. Laguerre's life, the abuse of wood-cutting reached most scandalous proportions. On certain moonlit nights no less than two hundred faggots would be bound in the woods; and as for gleaning in fields and vineyards, the Aigues lost (as Sibilet had just pointed out) about one-fourth of its produce in such ways.

Mlle. Laguerre forbade La Cochet to marry during her own lifetime, a piece of selfishness where dependants are concerned that may be remarked all the world over, and in its absurdity about on a par with the mania of those who clutch till their latest sigh at possessions which have long ceased to contribute to their enjoyment, at imminent risk of being poisoned by their impatient next-of-kin. So three weeks after Mlle. Laguerre was laid in the earth, Mlle. Cochet married a police sergeant

at Soulanges, Soudry by name, a fine-looking man of forty-two, who had come to the Aigues almost every day to see her since the creation of the police force in 1800, and dined at least four days a week with Gaubertin and La Cochet.

All through Madame's life she had had her meals served apart and alone when she had no visitors. In spite of the familiar terms on which she lived with La Cochet and Gaubertin, neither of them was permitted to sit at table with the first pupil of the *Académie royale de musique et de danse*, and to the very end she preserved her etiquette, her manner of dress, her rouge, her high-heeled pantofles, her carriage and servants, and divinity of the goddess. A goddess on the stage, a goddess of the town, though buried away in the country she was a goddess still; her memory is held in veneration there, dividing the honours very evenly with the court of Louis XVI. in the estimation of the 'best society' of Soulanges.

The aforesaid Soudry, who paid court to La Cochet from the very first, was the owner of the nicest house in Soulanges and about six thousand francs, with a prospect of a retiring pension of four hundred francs. La Cochet, now Mme. Soudry, was a person of no little consequence in Soulanges. The retired lady's-maid was generally supposed to possess one of the largest fortunes in the little town of some twelve hundred inhabitants; but she never said a word about her savings, which were placed, together with Gaubertin's capital, in the hands of a wine merchant's commission agent in Paris, one Leclercq, who belonged to that part of the country, Gaubertin being his sleeping partner.

Great was the general astonishment when M. and Mme. Soudry, by their marriage-contract, legitimatised a natural son of the bridegroom; to this boy, therefore, Mme. Soudry's fortune would in due course descend. On the day when he officially received a mother, he had

just finished his law studies, and proposed to keep his terms so as to become a magistrate.

It is almost superfluous to add that there was a firm friendship between the Gaubertins and the Soudrys, a friendship which had its source in a mutual intelligence of twenty years' standing. Both sides were in duty bound till the end of their days to give each other out *urbi et orbi* for the salt of the earth. This interest, based on a knowledge on either side of secret stains on the white garment of conscience, is one of the most indissoluble of all bonds. You who read this social drama are so sure of this, that given the phenomenon of a lasting devotion which puts your egoism to the blush, you will say of the pair 'that those two must have committed some crime together.'

After twenty-five years of stewardship, the steward found that he could command six hundred thousand francs in coin, and La Cochet possessed about two hundred and fifty thousand. Dexterous and continual changes of investment did not a little to swell the capital deposited with the firm of Leclercq & Company on the Quai de Béthune in the Ile Saint-Louis (rivals of the famous house of Grandet), and helped to build up fortunes for the commission agent and Gaubertin. After Mlle. Laguerre's death, Leclercq, the head of the firm on the Quai de Béthune, asked for the steward's eldest daughter, Jenny, in marriage, and then it was that Gaubertin flattered himself that he saw how to make himself master of the Aigues. Twelve years previously a notary had set up at Soulanges through Gaubertin's influence, and in Maître Lupin's office the plot was hatched.

Lupin, a son of the Comte de Soulanges's late agent, had lent himself to all the various manœuvres, unhappily too common in out-of-the-way country places, by which important pieces of property change hands in a hole-and-corner sort of way (to use a popular expression—such methods, for example, as under-valuations of real estate,

or putting up property for sale and fixing the reserve bid at one-half the actual value, or distributing unauthorised placards. Lately, so it is said, he has formed a society in Paris for blackmailing weavers of such schemes with threats of running prices up against them; but in 1816 the scorching glare of publicity, in which we live to-day, had not yet been turned on France, so those in the plot might fairly reckon upon dividing the Aigues among them. It was a job arranged by La Cochet, the notary, and Gaubertin; the latter reserving *in petto* his own further scheme of buying out his confederates so soon as the land should be purchased in his name. Lupin chose the attorney, whom he instructed to make application to the court for leave to sell. This man had agreed to make over his practice to Gaubertin's son, and was waiting to receive payment, so that he had an interest in the spoliation, if indeed those eleven labourers in Picardy, who came in for such an unexpected windfall, could regard themselves as despoiled.

But on the eve of the auction, at the moment when all concerned thought themselves secure of doubling their fortunes at a stroke, there came down a solicitor from Paris, who went to a solicitor at Ville-aux-Fayes (an old clerk of his, as it turned out), and the former empowered the latter to buy the Aigues, which he accordingly did, for eleven hundred and fifty thousand francs. Gaubertin was convinced that Soudry was at the bottom of this, and Lupin and Soudry were equally sure that Gaubertin had outwitted them both; but when the purchaser's name was declared, a reconciliation took place.

The country solicitor had his own suspicions of the plans formed by Gaubertin, Lupin, and Soudry, but he was very careful not to enlighten his sometime employer, and for the following excellent reason: Unless the newcomer kept his own counsel, the ministerial official would have the country made too hot to hold him. The wisdom of his taciturnity was, moreover, amply justified by

the subsequent course of events to be related in this *Étude*. If the provincial is crafty, it is in self-defence; his excuse lies in the danger of a position admirably depicted by the popular adage, 'One must howl with the wolves,' a doctrine which finds its concrete expression in the character of Philinte.

So when General de Montcornet took possession of the Aigues, Gaubertin was not rich enough to resign his post. If his eldest daughter was to marry the rich banker of the Entrepôt, her portion of two hundred thousand francs must be forthcoming; then there was his son's practice, which would cost thirty thousand francs; and out of the three hundred and seventy thousand which still remained to him, he must sooner or later find a dowry for his youngest girl Élisa, who, he hoped, would make a match as brilliant as that of her older sister. The steward determined to study Montcornet's character, possibly he might contrive to disgust the General with the place, and to reap the benefit of his abortive schemes.

With the peculiar shrewdness of those who have made their way by cunning, Gaubertin put faith in a not ill-grounded belief in a general resemblance between the character of an old soldier and an aged actress. An opera girl, and one of Napoleon's old generals—what could you expect of either but the same thriftlessness, the same careless ways? To the adventuress and to the soldier fortune comes capriciously and through peril. There may be astute, shrewd, and politic military men, but they surely are not the ordinary stamp. The typical soldier is supposed to be simple and unsuspecting, a child in matters of business, and but little fitted to cope with the thousand and one details of the management of a great estate, and this more particularly in the case of such a fire-eater as Montcornet. Gaubertin flattered himself that he could take and hold the General in the

net in which Mlle. Laguerre had ended her days. But it so happened that, in the time of the Emperor, Montcornet had himself been in very much such a position in Pomerania as Gaubertin held at the Aigues, and the General had had practical experience of the opportunities of a stewardship.

When the old Cuirassier took to 'planting cabbages,' to use the expression of the first Duc de Biron, he wanted some occupation to divert his mind from his fall. Although he had carried his corps over to the Bourbons, his share of a service performed by several generals, and christened the 'Disbanding of the Army of the Loire,' could not redeem his blunder of the following year, when Montcornet had followed the Man of the Hundred Days to his last field of battle at Waterloo. During the occupation of the Allies it was impossible for the peer of 1815 to remain on the muster-roll of the army, and still more impossible to retain his seat at the Luxembourg. So Montcornet acted on the advice of the old maréchal in disgrace, and went to cultivate carrots in sober earnest. The General was not wanting in the shrewdness of an old war-wolf. During the very first days spent in investigating his possessions, he soon found out the sort of man that he had to do with in Gaubertin; for the typical steward under the old noblesse was a variety of rogue familiar to almost all of Napoleon's mushroom nobility of dukes and marshals sprung from beds of straw.

The shrewd old Cuirassier likewise saw how useful Gaubertin's profound experience of agricultural administration and the manners and customs of misdemeanants would be to him; so he appeared to be a continuation of Mlle. Laguerre, with an assumption of carelessness which deceived the steward. The period of ineptitude lasted until the General had time to find out the strong and weak points of the Aigues, the ins and outs of the receipts, the manner in which rents were collected, the

necessary improvements and economies, and the ways in which he was robbed.

Then one fine day, catching Gaubertin with his hand in the bag (to use the time-honoured expression), the General took occasion to fly into one of the fearful passions to which the conquering hero is peculiarly subject. Therein he committed a capital error. It was one of those blunders which would have shaken the future of a man who had not his great wealth or firmness of purpose, and there, in fact, was the origin of the whole tissue of disasters, great and small, with which this story teems. Montcornet had been trained in the Imperial school, he slashed his way through difficulties, and deep was his scorn of civilians. Montcornet could not see that there was any need to mince matters when a rascally steward was to be sent about his business. The General knew nothing of civil life and its countless precautions, his temper was not improved by his disgrace, so he inflicted a deep mortification on Gaubertin, who, moreover, drew it upon himself by a cynical retort that infuriated the General.

'So you are living on my land!' the Count had remarked with grim hilarity.

'Did you suppose that I could live on what falls from heaven?' Gaubertin retorted with a grin.

'Get out of this, you scamp, or I'll make you!' roared the General, accompanying the words with several cuts of a horse-whip, though the steward always denied a thrashing that no one witnessed.

'I shall not go till I have my discharge,' Gaubertin exclaimed coolly, as soon as he had put a distance between himself and the truculent Cuirassier.

'We shall see what they think of you in a court of law,' returned Montcornet, with a shrug.

At the threat of prosecution, Gaubertin looked the Count in the face and smiled; it was a smile of peculiar efficacy, for the General's arm dropped to his side as if

the sinews had been cut. Let us go into the explanation of that smile.

Two years ago Gaubertin's brother-in-law Gendrin had been appointed to the presidency of the Court of First Instance, where he had long been a judge. He owed the appointment to the Comte de Soulanges, who had been made a peer of France in 1814, and had kept staunch to the Bourbons during the Hundred Days. M. de Soulanges had asked the Keeper of the Seals to nominate Gendrin. Such kinship as this gave Gaubertin a certain importance in the country. A president of a Court of First Instance in a small town is, relatively speaking, a much greater person than the president of a Court-Royal in a city where there are rival luminaries in the shape of the commander, the bishop, prefect, and receiver-general; a simple president of a Court of First Instance shines alone, for neither the public prosecutor nor the sub-prefect is a permanent official. Young Soudry and Gaubertin's son had been friends as lads at the Aigues, and afterwards in Paris, and now young Soudry had just received the appointment of public-prosecutor's substitute in the chief town of the department.

Soudry senior, once a quartermaster in an artillery regiment, had been wounded in an action in defence of M. de Soulanges, then adjutant-general. Since those day the gendarmerie had been established, and M. de Soulanges (now a colonel) asked for a police-sergeant's post for the man who had saved his life, and, at a later time, obtained a post for Soudry's son. And finally, when Mlle. Gaubertin's marriage had been definitely arranged at the Quai de Béthune, the unjust steward felt that he had a stronger position in the district than an unattached lieutenant-general.

If this story were nothing but a chronicle of the rupture between the General and his steward, it would even then be well worth serious attention, as a guide to the conduct of life. Those who can profit by the

perusal of Machiavelli's treatise will find it demonstrated therein that, in dealing with human nature, it is a prudent course to refrain from menaces, to proceed to act without talking about it, to leave a way of escape open to a defeated enemy, to be very careful, as the saying is, not to tread on a serpent's tail, and to avoid, like murder, any mortification to an inferior. A deed, once done, is forgiven sooner or later, injurious though it may have been to other people's interests (a fact which may be explained in ways too numerous to mention), but a wound dealt to self-love is never staunched, and never pardoned. Our mental susceptibilities are keener and, in a sense, more vital than our physical susceptibilities, and the heart and arteries are less sensitive than the nerves. In everything that we do, in fact, it is this inmost *ego* who rules us. Civil war will quench an ancestral blood-feud, as has been seen in the history of Breton and Vendean families; but between the spoiler and the spoiled, the slanderer and his victim, no reconciliation is possible. People should refrain from insulting each other, except in epic poems, before a general and final slaughter.

The savage and his near relation, the peasant, never make use of articulate speech, except to lay traps for their enemies. Ever since 1789 France has been trying to persuade mankind, against all evidence to the contrary, that all men are equal; you may tell a man that he is a rascal, and it passes for a harmless joke; but once proceed to bring it home to him by detecting him in the act, and enforcing your conclusion by a horsewhip, once threaten him with prosecution and fail to execute your threat, and you set up the old conditions of inequality again. And if the people cannot suffer any superiority, how should any rogue forgive an honest man?

Montcornet should have parted with his steward on some pretext of old obligations to fulfil, some old soldier to put in his place; and both Gaubertin and the General

would have known the real reason perfectly well. If the latter had been more careful of the former's self-love, he would have left an open door for the man's retreat, and Gaubertin would have left the great landowner in peace; he would have forgotten his defeat at the auction, and very likely would have looked for an investment for his capital in Paris. But now that he was ignominiously driven from his post, he nursed a rancorous hatred of his employer, one of those hatreds which are an element of provincial life ; so lasting and so pertinacious are they, that their intricate meshes amaze diplomatists, whose cue it is to be astonished at nothing. A burning thirst for vengeance counselled retirement to Ville-aux-Fayes; there he would put himself in a position which gave him power to annoy Montcornet, and raise up enemies in sufficient force to compel him to sell the Aigues.

Everything combined to deceive the General. Nothing in Gaubertin's appearance was calculated to warn or alarm him. The steward had always made it a rule to pose not exactly as a poor man, but as a man who found it difficult to make both ends meet—a tradition which was handed down by his predecessor. Therefore for the last twelve years he put his wife and three children forward on all occasions, and talked about the heavy expenses of so large a family. It was Mlle. Laguerre who paid for his son's education in Paris; Gaubertin told her that he himself was too poor to afford the expense ; and she, Claude Gaubertin's godmother, had allowed her dear godson a hundred louis per annum.

The next day Gaubertin appeared accompanied by one of the keepers, Courtecuisse by name, and held his head high, and asked for his discharge. He laid before the General the discharges given him by the late Mlle. Laguerre, all couched in flattering terms, and begged, with ironical humility, that the General would discover and point out any instances of misappropriation on his,

Gaubertin's part. If he received a bonus from the timber merchants and farmers on the renewal of contracts or leases, Mlle. Laguerre had always authorised it (he said), and she had actually been a gainer by so doing; and not only so, by these means she had lived in peace. Any one in the countryside would have died for Mademoiselle; but if the General went on in this way, he was laying up trouble in plenty for himself.

Gaubertin believed—and this last trait is very common in most professions where men exercise their wits to take their neighbour's goods in ways unprovided for by the Code—Gaubertin believed that he was a perfectly honest man. In the first place, there was the old affair of the coin wrung from the tenants during the Terror; it was so long now since he remitted the rents to Mlle. Laguerre in assignats and pocketed the difference, that he had come to regard the money as lawful acquired gain. It was simply a matter of exchange. Before he had done, he began to think that he had even run some risk in taking silver crowns, and besides, *legally*, mademoiselle had no right to anything but assignats. *Legally* is a robust adverb; it carries the weight of many ill-gotten gains! Finally, ever since great landowners and stewards have existed, which is to say, ever since the first beginnings of civilisation, the steward has fabricated for his personal use a chain of reasoning that finds favour with cookmaids at the present day, and which may be concisely stated as follows:—

'If my mistress went to market herself' (so the handmaid privately argues), 'she perhaps would buy dearer than I do; so she is a gainer, and the profit that I make had better go into my pocket than to the shopkeepers.'

'If Mlle. Laguerre were to manage the Aigues for herself, she would not make thirty thousand francs out of it; the peasants, and timber merchants, and labourers would rob her of the difference; it is more natural that

I should keep it, and I spare her a deal of trouble,' said Gaubertin to himself.

No influence save the Catholic religion has power to prevent such capitulation of conscience; but since 1789 religion in France has lost its hold on two-thirds of the population. Poverty induces uniformity, and in the valley of the Aigues, where the peasants were mentally very wide awake, they had sunk to a frightful degree of moral degradation. They certainly went to mass of a Sunday, but they stopped outside the church, and had fallen into a habit of meeting there regularly to conclude bargains and discuss business.

The reader should by this time have an idea of the extent of the mischief done by the easy-going ways of the first pupil of the *Académie royale de musique*. Mlle. Laguerre's selfishness had injured the cause of those who have, always an object of hatred to those who have not. Since 1792 all the landowners of France must show a compact front, and stand or fall together. Alas! if the families of feudal nobles, less numerous than bourgeois families, could not understand the unity of their interests in 1400 in the time of Louis XI., nor yet again in 1600 under Richelieu, how should the bourgeoisie of this nineteenth century (in spite of its boasted progress) be more united than the old noblesse? An oligarchy of a hundred thousand rich men has all the drawbacks of a democracy with none of its advantages. *Each for himself! Let each man mind his own business!* Family selfishness is stronger than the class selfishness so much needed by society in these days, that oligarchical selfishness of which England has exhibited such a striking example for the past three hundred years. No matter what is done, the landowners will never see any necessity for a discipline through which the Church has come to be such an admirable model of government, until the moment when the threatened danger comes home to them, and then it will be too late. Communism, that living force

and practical logic of democracy, is already attacking society in the domain of theory, whence it is evident that the proletarian Samson, grown prudent, will henceforth sap the pillars of society in the cellar, instead of shaking them in the banqueting hall.

VII

OF EXTINCT SOCIAL SPECIES.

THE AIGUES must have a steward, for the General had no idea of giving up the pleasures of the winter season in Paris, where he had a splendid mansion in the Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins. So he looked out for a successor to Gaubertin; but, in truth, he was at less pains to find a steward than Gaubertin to put a man of his own choosing into the place.

Of all responsible posts, there is not one which demands greater experience and more activity than the stewardship of a great estate. The difficulty of finding the man is only appreciated by great landowners, and becomes acute only at a distance of say forty leagues from the capital. That is the limit of the area which supplies the Paris markets, the limit also of steady rents and of long leases, and of tenants with capital in competition for them. Tenants of this class come into town in cabriolets and pay their rent with cheques, if indeed their salesman at the Great Market does not make their payments for them. There is such brisk competition for farms in the departments of Seine-et-Oise, Seine-et-Marne, Oise, Eure-et-Loire, Seine-Inférieure, and Loiret, that capital does not always return one and a half per cent. Even compared with the returns of land in Holland, Belgium, and England, this produce is enormous; but beyond a limit of fifty leagues from Paris, a large estate means so

many different forms of cultivation, so many and such different crops, that farming becomes an industry, with a manufacturer's risks. A great landowner under these circumstances is nothing but a merchant, who must find a market for his produce like any iron-master or cotton-spinner. Nor is he without competitors; the peasants and the small proprietors cut down his profits remorselessly by descending to transactions in which no gentleman will engage.

A steward should know the system of land measurement, the customs of the countryside, the methods of sale and exploitation, and must be able to sail pretty near the wind in his employer's interest. He must understand book-keeping; and, besides enjoying the best of health, must have a decided taste for equitation and an active life. He is the master's representative, and always in communication with him, and cannot be a man of the people. And as few stewards' salaries exceed a thousand crowns per annum, the problem of discovering the model steward would appear to be insoluble. How should a man combining so many precious qualities be found at such a moderate price, where any employment is open to him in this country? . . . Send for a man who does not know the district, and you shall pay dear for the experience he acquires. Train up a youth who belongs to the neighbourhood, and in all likelihood you cocker ingratitude. So you are left to choose between honest ineptitude, so slow or so short-sighted as to injure your interests, and self-seeking cleverness. Wherefore the classification and natural history of stewards was thus summed up by a great Polish landowner, 'There are two varieties here,' said he; 'the first kind of steward thinks of no one but himself; the second thinks of us as well as of himself; happy the landowner who can put his hand on the second! As for the steward who only thinks of your interests, he has never been seen here up to the present time!'

An example of a steward who bears his employer's interests in mind, as well as his own, has been given elsewhere[1]; Gaubertin is the steward who thinks of nothing but his own fortune; as for the third term of the problem, any representation of him would probably be regarded as a fancy portrait; he was known to the old noblesse, but the type vanished with them.[2] The continual subdivision of fortunes inevitably brings about a change in the way of life of the aristocracy. If there are not at present twenty fortunes administered by a steward, in fifty years' time there will not be a hundred great estates left for stewards to administer, unless some change is made meanwhile in the law. Every rich landowner will be obliged to look closely to his own interests himself. This process of transformation, even now begun, suggested the remark made by a witty old lady, who was asked why she had spent the summer in Paris since 1830: 'Since the châteaux became farm-houses I have ceased to visit them,' she said.

But what will be the end of a dispute which waxes hotter and hotter between man and man, between rich and poor? This *Etude* has been undertaken to throw light upon this terrible social question, and for no other reason.

The General had dismissed Gaubertin, and the General's awkward predicament may be imagined. While saying vaguely to himself, like all persons who are free to act or no, 'I will get rid of that rogue,' he had not reckoned with fate, nor with his own furious outbursts of anger, the anger of a choleric fire-eater, ready to break out as soon as some flagrant misdeed should force him to raise the eyelids which he deliberately closed.

Montcornet, a Parisian born and bred, was a landowner for the first time in his life, and his preliminary studies of the country had convinced him that some inter-

[1] See *Un Début dans la Vie.* [2] *Le Cabinet des Antiques.*

mediary between a man in his position and so many peasants was absolutely necessary; but he had omitted to provide himself beforehand with a steward.

Gaubertin in the course of an exchange of courtesies, which lasted for a couple of hours, discovered the General's predicament; so on leaving the house, the ex-steward bestrode his cob, and galloped off to take counsel with Soudry at Soulanges.

No sooner had he said, 'The General and I have parted company; how can we fit him with a steward of our own choosing?' than the Soudrys saw what their friend had in mind. It must not be forgotten that police-sergeant Soudry had been in office in the canton for seventeen years, and that to back him he had a wife endowed with the cunning peculiar to an opera singer's waiting-maid.

'He will go a long way before he will find any one as good as poor Sibilet,' said Mme. Soudry.

'His goose is cooked!' cried Gaubertin, still red with the humiliations he had been through.

'Lupin,' he went on, turning to the notary who was present, 'just go down to Ville-aux-Fayes and prime Maréchal, in case our fine Cuirassier goes to ask him for information.'

Maréchal was the local solicitor who had bought the Aigues, and had naturally been recommended to Montcornet by his own family solicitor in Paris after the happy conclusion of the bargain.

The Sibilet to whom they alluded, the oldest son of the clerk of the court at Ville-aux-Fayes, was a notary's clerk without a penny to bless himself with. He had fallen madly in love at the age of twenty-five with the daughter of the justice of the peace at Soulanges.

That worthy magistrate, Sarcus by name, having a stipend of fifteen hundred francs, had married a penniless girl, the oldest sister of the Soulanges apothecary, M. Vermut. Mlle. Sarcus was an only daughter, but her

beauty was all her dowry, and she could not be said to live on the salary of a country notary's clerk. Young Sibilet was related to Gaubertin (his precise degree of relationship would have been rather difficult to trace among the family ramifications of a small town where all the middle-class people were cousins); but, thanks to his father and to Gaubertin, he had a modest place in the Land Registration Department. To this luckless young man's lot fell the alarming blessing of two children in three years' time. His own father had a family of five, and could do nothing to help his son; his father-in-law, the justice of the peace, had nothing but his house in Soulanges, and a thousand crowns of income, so Mme. Sibilet the younger, and her two children, lived for the most part under her father's roof; and Adolphe Sibilet, whose duties took him all over the department, only saw his Adeline at intervals, an arrangement which perhaps explains the fruitfulness of some marriages.

Gaubertin's exclamation will be easily understood by the light of this summary of Sibilet's history, but a few explanatory details must be added. Adolphe Sibilet, surpassingly ill favoured, as has been seen in a preceding sketch, belonged to that class of men whose only way to a woman's heart lies through the mayor's office and the church. With something of the suppleness of a steel spring, he would relinquish his idea to seize on it again at a later day, a shifty disposition of mind closely resembling baseness; but in the course of an apprenticeship served in a country notary's office, Sibilet had learned to hide this defect beneath a gruff manner, which simulated a strength which he did not possess. Plenty of hollow natures mask their emptiness in this way; deal their own measure to them, and you shall see them collapse like a balloon at a pin-prick. This was the clerk's son. But as men, for the most part, are not observers, and as among observers three-

fourths observe after the fact, Adolphe Sibilet's grumbling manner was taken for the result of an honest outspoken nature, a capacity much praised by his employer, and an upright integrity which had never been put to the proof. Sometimes a man's defects are as useful to him as better qualities to his neighbour.

Adeline Sarcus, a nice-looking young woman, had been brought up by a mother (who died three years before her marriage), as carefully as only daughters can be educated in a little out-of-the-way place. Adeline was in love with the handsome Lupin, only son of the Soulanges notary. But her romance was still in its early chapters when Lupin senior (who intended his son to marry Mlle. Elise Gaubertin) sent young Amaury Lupin to Paris into the office of Maître Crottat, notary; and under the pretence of studying the art of conveyancing and drawing up contracts, Amaury led a wild life, and got into debt under the auspices of another clerk in the same office, one George Marest, a wealthy young fellow, who initiated Lupin into the mysteries of Parisian life. By the time that Maître Lupin came to fetch his son home again, Adeline had changed her name, and was Mme. Sibilet. In fact, when the amorous Adolphe presented himself, Sarcus, the old justice of the peace, acting on a hint from Lupin senior, hastened on a marriage, to which Adeline resigned herself in despair.

An assessor's place is not a career. Like many other departments which offer no prospects, it is a sort of hole in the administrative colander. The men who start in life through one of these holes (say in the Ordnance Survey, Department of Roads and Bridges, or the teaching profession) always discover a little late that cleverer men than they, seated beside them, are 'kept moist by the sweat of the people' (in the language of Opposition writers) every time that the colander is dipped into the taxes by means of the machinery called the Budget. Adolphe, working early and late, and

earning little, very soon discovered the bottomless barrenness of his hole; so as he trotted from commune to commune, spending his salary on travelling expenses and shoe leather, his thoughts were busy with schemes for finding a permanent and profitable situation.

No one can imagine, unless indeed he happens to squint and to have two children born in lawful wedlock, how three years of struggle and love had developed ambition in this young fellow, who had a mental squint resembling his physical infirmity, and whose happiness halted, as it were. Perhaps an incomplete happiness is the chief cause of most scoundrelly actions and untold basenesses committed in secret; it may be that we can more easily endure hopeless misery than steady rain, with brief glimpses of sunshine and love. Just as the body contracts diseases, the soul contracts the canker of envy. In little natures envy becomes a base and brutal covetousness, shrinking from sight, but from nothing else; in cultivated minds it fosters subversive doctrines, which a man uses as a stepping-stone to raise himself above his superiors. Might not the situation be summed up in an aphorism, 'Tell me what you have, and I will tell you your opinions'?

Adolphe was fond of his wife, but he constantly said to himself, 'I have made a mistake; I have three sets of shackles, and only one pair of legs; I ought to have made my way before I married. I might have found an Adeline any day; but now Adeline stands in my way.'

Adolphe had gone to see his relative Gaubertin three times in as many years. A few words that he let fall told Gaubertin that here in his relative's soul was the mud which hardens under the fiery heat of the temptation of legalised robbery. Warily he probed this nature, which seemed plastic to his purpose, provided it were worth while to yield. Adolphe Sibilet grumbled on each occasion.

'Just find me something to do, cousin,' he said.

'Take me on as your clerk, and make me your successor. I would remove mountains to give my Adeline, I will not say luxury, but a modest competence. You made M. Leclercq's fortune; why should you not start me in the banking line in Paris?'

'We will see. Some day I will find a place for you,' his ambitious relative would reply. 'Meantime, make acquaintances, everything helps.'

In this frame of mind a letter from Mme. Soudry, bidding him 'come at once,' brought Adolphe in hot haste to Soulanges through a region of castles in the air.

The Soudrys explained to Sarcus that on him devolved the duty of calling on the General on the morrow to put in a word for his son-in-law, and suggest Adolphe for the vacant position. Acting on the advice of Mme. Soudry, the local oracle, the old man had taken his daughter with him, and the sight of her had disposed Montcornet in their favour.

'I shall not decide until I have made inquiries,' the General said, 'but I will not look out for any one else until I have seen whether or no your son-in-law is in all respects the man for the place. The desire of settling so charming a young lady at the Aigues——'

'The mother of two children, General,' said Adeline adroitly, to turn off the old soldier's compliments.

All the General's inquiries were cleverly anticipated by the Soudrys, with Gaubertin and Lupin, who skilfully obtained for their candidate the influence of the leading men in the principal town of the canton—Councillor Gendrin of the Court-Royal (a distant relation of the president at Ville-aux-Fayes); Baron Bourlac, attorney-general, and young Soudry's chief; and Sarcus, councillor of the prefecture, third cousin to Adeline's father. Everybody, from the General's solicitor to the prefect (to whom the General went in person), had a good word for the underpaid official, 'so interesting' he was said to

be. Sibilet's marriage made him as irreproachable as one of Miss Edgeworth's novels, and marked him out as a man above mercenary motives.

The time which the steward spent perforce at the Aigues was turned to profit. He did all that in him lay to make trouble and annoyance for his old employer, but a single little scene will give a sufficient idea of the rest. The day after his dismissal he made an opportunity of finding Courtecuisse, the one forester employed under his rule at the Aigues, which really required three at the least.

'Well, M. Gaubertin,' remarked the other, 'so you have had words with the master, have you?'

'You know that already!' exclaimed Gaubertin. 'Well, yes. The General takes it upon himself to order us about like his Cuirassiers; he does not know us Burgundians. M. le Comte was not satisfied with my services, and as I was not satisfied with his ways, we dismissed each other; we almost came to blows over it, for he is a perfect tempest. Look out for yourself, Courtecuisse! Ah! old boy, I once thought to have given you a better master——'

'I know you did,' said the keeper, 'and I would have served you well. Lord! after knowing each other these twenty years.—You took me on here in poor dear sainted Madam's time! Ah! a kind woman she was; they don't make such as her now! The place has lost a mother in her.'

'I say, Courtecuisse, if you are willing, you can do us a fine good turn.'

'Then are you going to stop in the place? We heard you were going to Paris.'

'No. I shall find something to do at Ville-aux-Fayes, and see how things turn out. The General does not know the people he is dealing with; he will be hated, do you see? I must wait and see if anything turns up. Go softly about your business here; he will

tell you to carry things with a high hand, for he can see well enough where the waste goes on. But do not you be so thick-headed as to lay yourself open to a drubbing, and maybe worse than a drubbing, from the people round about for the sake of his timber.'

'Dear M. Gaubertin, he will turn me away, and you know how very well off I am at the Avonne gate.'

'The General will be sick of his property before long,' said Gaubertin; 'it will not be long before you come back if he does turn you off.—And besides, do you see these woods here?' he added, waving his hand towards the landscape, 'I am stronger there than the masters.'

They were talking out in a field.

'These *Arminacs* from Paris ought to keep to their gutters in Paris,' said the keeper.

That word *Arminacs* has come down from the fifteenth century, when the Armagnacs, the Parisians, were hostile to the Duke of Burgundy. It is a word of abuse to-day on the outskirts of Upper Burgundy, where it is mispronounced in various ways in different districts.

'He shall go back, but not before he has had a thrashing!' said Gaubertin. 'Some of these days we will turn the park at the Aigues into ploughed land, for it is robbing the people to keep nine hundred acres of the best land in the valley for the pleasure of an upstart.'

'Lord! that would keep four hundred families!' put in Courtecuisse.

'Well, if you want two acres for yourself out of it, you must help us to make an outlaw of that cur——'

While Gaubertin was fulminating his sentence of excommunication, the worthy justice of the peace was introducing his son-in-law, Adolphe Sibilet, to the General. Adeline had come with the two children in the basket-chaise borrowed of Sarcus's registrar, a M. Gourdon, brother of the Soulanges doctor, and a richer man than the justice. This kind of thing, which suits but ill with the dignity of the magistrate's office, is to be

seen everywhere; every justice's clerk is richer than the justice himself; every clerk of a Court of First Instance is better paid than the president; whereas it would seem only natural to pay the subordinate, not by fees, but by a fixed salary, and so to cut down the expenses of litigation.

The General was well pleased with the worthy functionary's character and straightforwardness, and with Adeline's charming appearance; and, in fact, these two made their promises in all good faith, for neither father nor daughter knew of the diplomatic part cut out for Sibilet by Gaubertin; so M. de Montcornet at once made to the young and interesting couple proposals which would make the position of steward of the manor equal to that of a sub-prefect of the first class.

A lodge built by Bouret, partly as a feature of the landscape, partly as a house for the steward, was assigned to the Sibilets. It was a picturesque building in the same style as the Blangy gate, which has been sufficiently described already; Gaubertin had previously lived there. The General showed no intention of putting down the riding-horse which Mlle. Laguerre had allowed Gaubertin for his own use, on account of the size of the estate, and the distance he was obliged to go to markets and on other necessary business. The new steward was allowed a hundred bushels of wheat, three hogsheads of wine, as much firewood as he required, oats and barley in abundance, and three per cent upon the receipts. If Mlle. Laguerre had drawn more than forty thousand livres of income from the estate in 1800, the General thought, and with good reason, that after all her numerous and important purchases it should bring in sixty thousand in 1818. The new steward, therefore, might look to make nearly two thousand francs in money some day. He would live rent free and tax free, with no expenses for food, or fuel, or horse, or poultry-yard; and besides all this, the Count allowed him a kitchen garden, and

promised not to consider a day's work done in it by the gardener now and again. Such advantages were certainly worth a good two thousand francs. The stewardship of the Aigues after the assessorship was a transition from penury to wealth.

'If you devote yourself to my interests,' said the General, 'I may do more for you. For one thing, I shall have it in my power to appoint you to collect the taxes in Conches, Blangy, and Cerneux, separating those three places from the Soulanges division. In short, as soon as you bring the net receipts up to sixty thousand francs, you shall have your reward.'

Unluckily, the worthy Sarcus and Adeline, in the joy of their hearts, were so imprudent as to tell Mme. Soudry about the Count's promise. They forgot that the receiver at Soulanges was one Guerbet, brother of the postmaster at Conches, and a connection, as will be seen later, of the Gendrins and Gaubertins.

'It will not be easy to do, my child,' said Mme. Soudry, 'but do not hinder the Count from setting about it; no one knows how easily the hardest things are done in Paris. I have seen the Chevalier Gluck down on his knees to Madam that 's gone, and she sang his part for him—she that would have cut herself in pieces for Piccini, and Piccini was one of the most agreeable men of those days. He never came to Madam's house, dear gentleman, but he would put his arm round my waist and call me his "pretty rogue."'

'Oh, indeed!' cried the sergeant, when his wife retailed this piece of news, 'so he thinks that he will do as he likes with the place, turn things upside down, and order people about right and left as if they were men in his regiment. These officers have domineering ways! But wait a while, we have M. de Soulanges and M. de Ronquerolles on our side. Poor old Guerbet, how little he suspects that they mean to pluck the finest roses off his tree.'

The lady's-maid had this piece of Dorat phraseology from Mlle. Laguerre, who learned it of Bouret, who had it from some editor of the *Mercure*. And now Soudry used it so often that it became a current saying at Soulanges.

Now 'old Guerbet,' receiver of taxes at Soulanges, was a local wit, the stock comic character of the little town, and one of the notables in Mme. Soudry's set. The sergeant's outburst exactly expressed the general feeling towards the master of the Aigues. From Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes the whole district had been poisoned against him by Gaubertin's efforts.

Sibilet's installation took place towards the end of the autumn of 1817. The year 1818 came and went, and the General never set foot on the estate. He was occupied by his own approaching marriage, which took place early in 1819, and he spent most of the summer in paying court to his betrothed in his future father-in-law's château near Alençon. Besides the Aigues and his splendid townhouse, General de Montcornet possessed an income of sixty thousand francs in the Funds, and drew the pay of a lieutenant-general on the reserve. Yet, although Napoleon had made the brilliant soldier a Count of the Empire, granting him for arms *a shield bearing four coats quarterly: the first, azure, on a desert or three pyramids argent; the second, sinople, three bugles argent; the third, gules, a cannon or, mounted on a gun carriage sable, in chief a crescent of the second; the fourth, or a crown sinople*, with the mediæval sounding motto, *Sonnez la charge*, Montcornet was conscious that his father had been a cabinet-maker in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, a fact which he was perfectly willing to forget. Wherefore, consumed with a desire to be a peer of France, he counted as nought his grand cordon of the Legion of Honour, his Cross of Saint-Louis, and a hundred and forty thousand francs of income. The demon of titles had bitten him, the sight of a blue

ribbon drove him distracted, and the heroic fighter on Essling field would have lapped all the mud on the Pont Royal to gain an entrance into the set of the Navarreins, Lenoncourts, Maufrigneuses, d'Espards, and Vandenesses, the families of Grandlieu, Verneuil, d'Hérouville, Chaulieu, and so forth.

In the year 1818, when it became plain to him that there was no hope of a return of the Bonapartes, Montcornet availed himself of the friendly offices of his friends' wives. Those ladies advertised in the Faubourg Saint-Germain that the General was ready to give heart and hand and fortune and a house in town as the price of an alliance with any great family whatsoever.

It was the Duchesse de Carigliano who succeeded after untold efforts in finding a suitable match in one of the three branches of the Troisville family, to wit, that of the Viscount who had been in the Russian service since 1789, and came back with the *émigrés* in 1815. The Viscount had only a younger brother's share when he married a Princesse Scherbellof with near a million to her fortune ; but his estate had been burdened since by two sons and three daughters. His ancient and powerful family numbered among its members a peer of France, the Marquis de Troisville, head of the oldest branch ; as well as two deputies, each with a numerous progeny all busy in getting their share out of the taxes, hangers-on attached to the ministry and the court, like goldfishes about a crust. So as soon as Montcornet was introduced into this family by one of the most zealous Bourbon partisans among Napoleon's duchesses, he was well received. Montcornet asked, in return for his money and a blind affection for his wife, for a post in the Garde Royale, a marquis's patent, and to be in time a peer of France, but all that the Troisvilles promised him was the influence and support of their three branches.

'You know what that means,' said the Maréchale to her old friend, complaining that the promise was rather

vague. 'No one can answer for the King; we can only prompt the Royal will.'

Montcornet made Virginie de Troisville his residuary legatee in the marriage-contract. Completely subjugated by his wife, as explained by Blondet's letter, he was still without other heirs, but he had been presented at the court of Louis XVIII., and his Majesty had conferred the ribbon of Saint-Louis upon the old Bonapartist, and allowed him to quarter his preposterous scutcheon with the arms of Troisville; the marquisate and peerage were promised as rewards to future devotion.

But, a few days after the audience, the Duc de Berri was murdered, the Pavillon Marsan carried all before it, Villèle came into power, and all the Troisvilles' threads of diplomacy were broken off; new points of attachment must be found for them among the ministry.

'We must wait,' said the Troisvilles, and Montcornet, overwhelmed as he was with civilities in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, waited. This was how the General came to stay away from the Aigues in 1818.

In his happiness (ineffable bliss for the shopkeeper's son from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine) with this young wife, highly bred, lively, and sweet-natured, he must shower all the delights of Paris upon the daughter of the Troisvilles, who had opened all doors in the Faubourg Saint-Germain to him; and these diverse joys so completely effaced the unpleasant scene with the steward from his mind, that Gaubertin and his doings and his very name were quite forgotten.

In 1820 the General brought the Countess into the country to show her the Aigues, and passed Sibilet's accounts and ratified his actions without looking too closely into them. Happiness is no haggler. The Countess was delighted to find the steward's wife such a charming woman, and made presents to her and to the children, with whom she played for a little while. She also commanded some alterations in the house, and an

architect was summoned from Paris; for she proposed (and the General was wild with joy at the thought) to spend six months out of the twelve in such a splendid abode. All the General's savings were spent on carrying out the architect's scheme and on the dainty furniture from Paris; and the Aigues received that final touch which stamped it as unique—a monument to the tastes of four different centuries.

In 1821 the General was almost summoned by Sibilet before the month of May. Weighty matters were at stake. The nine years' lease of the woods to a timber merchant, concluded by Gaubertin in 1812 at thirty thousand francs, expired on May 15th of that year. So, at first, Sibilet would not meddle in the matter of renewing the lease; he was jealous of his reputation for honesty. 'You know, M. le Comte,' he wrote, 'that I have no finger in that pie.' But the timber merchant wanted the indemnity which he had shared with Gaubertin, an exaction to which Mlle. Laguerre had submitted in her dislike of lawsuits. The excuse for the indemnity was based on the depredations of the peasantry, who behaved as if they had an established right to cut wood for fuel in the forest. Messrs. Gravelot Brothers, the timber merchants in Paris, declined to pay for the last quarter, and offered to bring experts to prove that the woods had fallen off one-fifth in their annual value; they argued from the bad precedent established by Mlle. Laguerre.

'I have already summoned these gentlemen to appear in the Court at Ville-aux-Fayes,' so Sibilet's letter ran, 'for on account of this lease, they have appointed their domicile with my old employer, Maître Corbinet. I am afraid we shall lose the day.'

'Here is a matter in which our income is involved, fair lady,' said the General, showing the letter to his wife; 'do you mind going sooner than last year to the Aigues?'

'Do you go, and I will come down as soon as the summer begins,' said the Countess, rather pleased with the prospect of staying behind in Paris by herself.

So the General set out alone. He was fully determined to take strong measures, for he knew the treacherous disease which was eating into the best of his revenues; but, as remains to be seen, the General reckoned without his Gaubertin.

VIII

THE GREAT REVOLUTIONS OF A LITTLE VALLEY

'WELL, now, Lawyer Sibilet,' began the General on the morning after his arrival, addressing his steward by a familiar nickname, which showed how much he appreciated the legal knowledge of the quondam notary's clerk. 'Well, Lawyer Sibilet, and so, in Ministerial language, we are "passing through a crisis," are we?'

'Yes, M. le Comte,' replied Sibilet, following in the General's wake.

The happy proprietor of the Aigues was walking up and down before his steward's house, in a space where Mme. Sibilet's flowers were growing on the edge of the wide stretch of grass watered by the broad channel spoken of in Blondet's letter. The Aigues itself lay in full view of the garden, even as from the château you saw the steward's house, which had been built for the sake of its effect in the landscape.

'But where is the difficulty?' pursued the General. 'I shall go through with the Gravelots' case; a wound in the purse is not mortal. And I will have the contract well advertised; we shall soon find out the real value of the lease by comparing the bids of the competitors.'

'Things will not go off that way, M. le Comte,'

Sibilet answered. 'If you have no offers, what will you do then?'

'Fell my timber, and sell it myself.'

'*You* turn timber merchant!' cried Sibilet, and saw that the General shrugged his shoulders. 'I am quite willing. Let us say no more about your affairs here. Let us look at Paris. You would have to take a timber-yard on lease there, take out a license, pay taxes, pay lighterage, city dues, wharfingers and workmen, in short, you must have a responsible agent——'

'Quite out of the question!' the General hastily broke in in alarm. 'But why should I have no bidders?'

'M. le Comte, you have enemies in the place.'

'And who are they?'

'M. Gaubertin, first and foremost——'

'Oh! Is that the scamp who was here before your time?'

'Not so loud, M. le Comte!' entreated Sibilet in terror; 'for pity's sake, do not speak so loud! My servant girl may overhear——'

'What!' returned the General, 'cannot I talk on my own property of a scoundrel who robbed me?'

'If you value a quiet life, M. le Comte, come further away! . . . Now; M. Gaubertin is mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes.'

'Aha! I wish Ville-aux-Fayes joy of him with all my heart. Thunder of heaven! He is a nice mayor for a place!——'

'Do me the honour of listening to me, M. le Comte, and, believe me, we have a most serious matter in hand, the question of your future here.'

'I am listening. Let us sit down on this bench.'

'When you dismissed Gaubertin, M. le Comte, he had to do something, for he was not rich——'

'Not rich! and he was helping himself here to twenty thousand francs a year!'

'M. le Comte, I am not setting out to justify his

conduct,' Sibilet resumed. 'I should like to see the Aigues prosper, if it were only to establish the fact of Gaubertin's dishonesty; but we must not abuse him, he is the most dangerous rascal in all Burgundy, and he is in a position to do you a mischief.'

'How?' asked the General, grown thoughtful.

'Gaubertin, such as you see him, is the general agent of the wood merchants, and controls one-third of the Paris timber trade; he directs the whole business in wood—the growth, felling, storage, canal-transport, and salvage. He is a constant employer of labour, and can dictate his own terms. It has taken him three years to make this position, but he has fortified himself in it by now; he is the man of all the timber merchants, and he treats them all alike. He has the whole thing cut and dried for their benefit; their business is done more smoothly and with less working expense than if each man employed a separate agent, as they used to do. For one thing, he has weeded out competition so thoroughly, that he has a monopoly of contracts for timber, and the Crown forests are his preserves. The right of cutting timber in the Crown forests is put up periodically to auction, but practically it is in the hands of Gaubertin's clique of timber merchants, for by this time nobody is big enough to bid against them. Last year M. Mariotte of Auxerre, egged on by the Crown ranger, tried to outbid Gaubertin. Gaubertin let him have the trees at the ordinary price to begin with; then when it came to felling the woods the local wood-cutters wanted such wages that M. Mariotte had to send over to Auxerre for men, and when they came the Ville-aux-Fayes men set upon them. Then the ringleader of the union men and the leader of the brawl got into the police court. The proceedings cost money, and M. Mariotte had to pay all the costs, for the men had not a brass farthing. And let me tell you this, by the by (for you will have all the poor in the canton set against you)—you take nothing by

taking the law of poor folk except ill-will, if you happen to live among them.

'And that was not the end of it. When poor old Mariotte (a decent soul) came to reckon it all over, he was out of pocket by the contract. He had to pay money down for everything, and to sell for credit; Gaubertin delivered timber at unheard-of prices to ruin his competitor; he actually gave it away at five per cent below cost price, and poor old Mariotte's credit was badly shaken. In fact, Gaubertin is still after him at this day, and pesters him to that degree, that he is going to leave not merely Auxerre, they say, but the department too, and he is doing wisely. So, at one blow, the growers were sacrificed for a long time to come to the timber merchants, who settle the prices among themselves, like brokers and furniture dealers in the Paris Sale Rooms. But Gaubertin saves the growers so much bother, that it is worth their while to employ him.'

'And how so?' asked the General.

'In the first place,' said Sibilet, 'anything that simplifies business is sooner or later to the interest of all concerned. Then the owners of forests are sure of their money. That is the great thing, as you will find out, in all sales of produce. And, lastly, M. Gaubertin is like a father to the labourers; he pays them good wages, and finds them constant work; and as the wood-cutters' families live in the neighbourhood, there is no damage done to the woods which belong to Gaubertin's timber merchants, or on the estates of Messieurs de Soulanges and de Ronquerolles and others who confide their interests to him. The peasants pick up the dead wood, and that is all.'

'That rogue Gaubertin has not wasted his time!' cried the General.

'Oh! he is a sharp man!' said Sibilet. 'He is, as he puts it, steward of the best half of the department now, instead of steward of the Aigues. He charges every one

a trifling percentage, but that mere trifle on a couple of million francs brings him in forty or fifty thousand francs a year. "The hearths of Paris pay for all," says he. That is your enemy, M. le Comte. So my advice to you is to come to terms with him. He is hand and glove, as you know, with Soudry, the police sergeant at Soulanges, and with M. Rigou, our mayor at Blangy; the rural police are his tools, so that it will be hard to put down the pilfering which is eating you up. Your woods have been ruined, more particularly during the last two years; so Messieurs Gravelot have a chance in their favour, for they say that, "by the terms of the lease, you were to pay the expenses of protecting your property; you are not protecting it, so you are doing us an injury, and you must make good our damages." Which is fair enough, but it is no reason why they should gain the day.'

'You must resign yourself to a lawsuit and to a loss of money over it to prevent other lawsuits in future,' said the General.

'You will delight Gaubertin,' retorted Sibilet.

'How?'

'If you go to law with the Gravelots, you will measure yourself man to man with Gaubertin, who represents them; he would like nothing so much as that lawsuit. As he says, he flatters himself that he will trail you on to the Court of Appeal.'

'Ah! the scoundrel! the——'

'Then if you fell and sell your own timber,' pursued Sibilet, turning the dagger in the wound, 'you will be in the hands of the labourers, who will ask you "fancy prices," instead of "trade wages"; they will "overweight" you, which means that they will put you in such a position that, like poor old Mariotte, you will have to sell at a loss. If you try to find a lessee, no one will make you an offer, for it stands to reason that no one will run the risk for a private estate that Mariotte

ran for the Crown Forest.—Moreover, suppose that the old man goes to complain about his losses to the Department. There is an official there, much such a man as your humble servant used to be in his assessor days, a worthy gentleman in a threadbare coat, who sits and reads a newspaper at a table. He is neither more nor less soft-hearted, whether they pay him twelve hundred or twelve thousand francs. Talk to the Inland Revenue Department, in the person of this gentleman, of allowances and reductions! He will answer you, "*Fiddle-de-dee!*" while he cuts his pen. You are an outlaw, M. le Comte.'

'What is to be done?' cried the General. His blood boiled; he strode up and down before the bench.

'M. le Comte,' said Sibilet with brutal frankness, 'what I am about to say is not in my own interests—you should sell the Aigues and leave the neighbourhood.'

At those words the General started back as if a bullet had struck him. He looked at Sibilet with a diplomatic expression.

'Is a general of the Imperial Guard to run away from such rogues; and after Mme. la Comtesse has taken a liking to the Aigues? Before I would do that I would force Gaubertin to fight me, give him a box on the ears in the market-place of Ville-aux-Fayes, and kill him like a dog.'

'Gaubertin is not such a fool as to come into collision with you. And besides, so important a person as the mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes cannot be insulted with impunity.'

'I will make a beggar of him; the Troisvilles will back me up; my income is involved.'

'You will not succeed in that, M. le Comte; Gaubertin has very long arms. You would only put yourself in an awkward predicament with no possible way out——'

'And how about this lawsuit?' said the General. 'We must think of the present.'

'M. le Comte, I will ensure that you shall gain it,' said Sibilet, with something knowing in his air.

'Well done, Sibilet!' said the General, gripping the steward's hand. 'And how?'

'You would gain the day in the Court of Appeal in the ordinary course of events. In my opinion, the Gravelots are in the right, but that is not enough, the case is not decided upon its merits; you must be technically in the right as well. The Gravelots have not observed the proper formalities, and a case always turns upon a question of that kind. The Gravelots ought to have given you notice to look after your woods better. Then you cannot come down upon people for allowances extending over a period of nine years at the expiration of a lease; there is a guarding clause inserted in the lease to prevent that. You will lose your case at Ville-aux-Fayes; perhaps you will lose it again in the higher court, but you will gain the day in Paris. You will be put to ruinous expense; there will be valuations which will cost a great deal. If you gain the case, you will spend twelve or fifteen thousand francs at least over it; but you will gain the day if you are bent upon so doing. The lawsuit will not mend matters with the Gravelots; it will cost them even more. You will be a bugbear to them, you will get a name for being litigious, you will be slandered, but you will gain the day——'

'What is to be done?' repeated the General. If Sibilet's remarks had touched upon the most heart-burning questions, they could not have produced more effect on Montcornet. He bethought himself of that thrashing administered to Gaubertin, and heartily wished that he had laid the horsewhip about his own shoulders. He turned a face on fire to Sibilet, who could read all his torments plainly there.

'What is to be done, M. le Comte?' echoed the other. 'There is only one thing to be done. Com-

pound with the Gravelots, but you cannot do it in person. I must act as if I were robbing you. Now, when all our comfort and all our prospects lie in our integrity, it is rather hard for us poor devils to submit to appear dishonest. We are always judged by appearances. Gaubertin, in his time, saved Mlle. Laguerre's life, and he to all appearance robbed her; but she rewarded him for his devotion by putting him down in her will for a jewel worth ten thousand francs, which Mme. Gaubertin wears on her forehead at this day.'

The General gave Sibilet a second glance, at least as diplomatic as the first, but the steward did not seem to feel the suspicion lurking beneath smiling good nature.

'My dishonesty will put M. Gaubertin in such high good humour, that I shall gain his goodwill,' continued Sibilet. 'He will listen with all his ears, too, when I come to lay this before him—"I can get twenty thousand francs out of the Count for the Gravelots, provided that they will go halves with me." If your opponents consent to that, I will bring you back the ten thousand francs. You only lose ten thousand, you save appearances, and there is an end of the lawsuit.'

'You are a good fellow, Sibilet,' said the General, grasping the steward's hand. 'If you can arrange for the future as well as for the present, I consider that you are a jewel of a land-steward——'

'As to the future, you will not starve if the wood is not felled for the next two or three years. Begin by looking after your woods. Between then and now a good deal of water will have flowed down the Avonne, Gaubertin may die, or he may have made enough to retire upon. In short, you will have time to find a competitor; the loaf is big enough to divide; you will find another Gaubertin to match him.'

'Sibilet,' said the old warrior, 'amazed at the variety of solutions, 'I will give you a thousand crowns if you

bring the matter to an end in this way; and then we will think things over.'

'Look after your woods before all things, M. le Comte. Go and see for yourself what the peasants have done there during the two years while you have been away. What could I do? I am a steward, not a keeper. You want three foresters and a mounted patrol to look after the Aigues.'

'We will defend ourselves. If war it is to be, we will fight. That does not frighten *me*,' said Montcornet, rubbing his hands.

'It is a money war,' said Sibilet, 'and that will seem harder to you than the other kind. You can kill men, but there is no killing men's interests. You will fight it out on a battlefield where all landowners must fight—called *realisation*. It is nothing to grow this and that; you must sell your produce; and if you mean to sell it, you must keep on good terms with everybody.'

'I shall have the country people on my side.'

'How so?' queried Sibilet.

'By treating them kindly.'

'Treat the peasants kindly and the townspeople at Soulanges!' cried Sibilet, squinting hideously, for one eye seemed to gleam more than the other with the irony in his words. 'You do not know, sir, what you are setting about. Our Lord Jesus Christ would be crucified there a second time. If you want a quiet life, M. le Comte, do as the late Mlle. Laguerre did—and let them rob you, or else strike terror into them. The people, women and children, are all governed in the same way—by terror. That was the grand secret of the Convention and of the Emperor.'

'Oh, come now! have we fallen among thieves here?' cried Montcornet.

Adeline came out to them.

'Your breakfast is waiting, dear,' she said to Sibilet.—'I beg your pardon, M. le Comte, but he has had

nothing this morning, and he has been as far as Ronquerolles with some corn.'

'Go, by all means, Sibilet.'

Montcornet was up and out before day next morning. He chose to return by the Avonne gate to have a chat with his one forester, and to sound the man's disposition.

Some seven or eight acres of forest lay beside the Avonne; a fringe of tall forest trees had been left along the bank on either side, that a river which flowed almost in a straight line for three leagues might preserve its stately character.

The Aigues had once belonged to a mistress of Henri IV., who loved the chase as passionately as the Béarnais. It was she who built, in 1593, the steep, single-span bridge over the Avonne to cross over to the much larger forest purchased for her on the other side of the river. The Avonne gate had been built at the same time as a *rendezvous* for the hunt, and every one knows that architects in those times lavished all magnificence upon edifices reared for this greatest pleasure of kings and princes. Six avenues met before it in a semicircular space, and in the centre of the crescent rose an obelisk surmounted by a sun once gilded, with the arms of Navarre on the one side, and those of the Comtesse de Moret on the other.

A corresponding crescent-shaped space by the Avonne communicated with the first by a broad, straight walk, whence you saw the angular crown of the Venetian-looking bridge. Between two handsome iron railings (resembling the magnificent ironwork which used to surround the Jardin de la Place Royale in Paris, now, alas! destroyed) stood a hunting-lodge built of brick, with stone string courses of the same depressed-pyramid pattern as at the château, stone facings likewise ornamented, and a high-pitched roof.

This bygone style, that gave the house the look of a royal hunting-lodge, is only suitable in towns for prisons, but here the background of forest trees set off its peculiarly grandiose character. The kennels, pheasant-houses, and the old quarters of falconers and prickers were screened by a blind wall. The place had once been the pride of Burgundy; now it lay almost in ruins.

In 1595 a royal train set out from that princely hunting-lodge, preceded by the great hounds beloved of Rubens and Paul Veronese; the horses that pawed the ground are now only seen in Wouvermans' wonderful pictures—mighty white beasts with a bluish shade on the heavy glossy hindquarters. After these followed footmen in gorgeous array, and the foreground was enlivened by the huntsmen in yellow breeches and high topboots who fill Van de Meulen's great canvases. The stone obelisk was reared to commemorate that day when the Béarnais went hunting with the beautiful Comtesse de Moret, and bore the date beneath the arms of Navarre. Navarre, not France; for the jealous mistress, whose son was declared to be a prince of the blood, could not endure that the arms of France should meet her eyes to reproach her.

But in 1823, when the General saw the splendid monument, the roof was green with moss on every side. The octagonal glass panes were dropping out of the loosened leads, the windows looked half-blind. The stones of the weather-worn string-courses seemed to cry out, with countless gaping mouths, against such desecration. Yellow wallflowers blossomed among the balusters; the ivy stems slipped pale down-covered claws into every crannie.

Everything spoke of a mean neglect. Selfishness, regardless of those to come after it, leaves its stamp on all its present possessions. Two windows above were stopped up with hay; one window on the ground floor

gave a glimpse of a room full of tools and firewood, and a cow's muzzle thrust from another informed the beholder that, to save himself the trouble of going to and fro between the pheasant-house and the lodge, Courtecuisse had made a cowhouse of the great hall, where the armorial bearings of every owner of the Aigues were painted on the panelled ceiling.

The whole approach to the house was disfigured by a collection of dirty black palings marking the limits of pigstyes roofed with planks, and little square pens for poultry and ducks. Every six months the accumulated filth was cleared away. Sundry rags were drying on the brambles, which had thrust themselves up here and there.

As the General came up the avenue from the bridge, he saw Courtecuisse's wife scouring the earthen pipkin in which she had just made coffee. The keeper himself was sitting on a chair in the sun looking on, much as a savage might watch his squaw. He turned his head at the sound of footsteps, saw the Count his master, and looked foolish.

'Well, Courtecuisse, my boy,' I don't wonder that some one else cuts down my wood before the Messrs. Gravelot can get it. Do you take your place for a sinecure?'

'Upon my word, M. le Comte, I have been out in your woods for so many nights that I have got a chill. I was feeling so bad this morning that my wife has been warming a poultice for me; she is cleaning the pipkin now.'

'My good fellow,' remarked the General, 'I only know of one complaint which needs poulticing with hot coffee, and that is hunger. Listen, you rogue! Yesterday I went through the woods belonging to Messrs. de Ronquerolles and de Soulanges, and then through my own. Theirs are properly looked after, and mine is in a pitiable state.'

'Ah! M. le Comte, *they* have been here this ever so long, they have; people let them alone. Would you have me fight with half-a-dozen communes? I value my life even more than your woods. Any man who tried to look after your woods properly would get a bullet through his head by way of wages in some corner of the forest.'

'Coward!' cried the General, choking down the wrath kindled by Courtecuisse's insolence. 'It has been a splendid night, but it has cost me three hundred francs at this moment, and a thousand francs in claims for damages to come.—Things must be done differently, or you shall go out of this. All past offences should be forgiven. Here are my conditions: you shall have all the fines and three francs for each conviction. If I do not find that this plan pays me better, you shall go about your business; while if you serve me well, and manage to put down the pilfering, you shall have a hundred crowns a year. Think it over. Here are six ways,' he went on, pointing to the alleys, 'like me, you must take one; I am not afraid of bullets. Try to find the right one.'

Courtecuisse, forty-six years of age, a short man with a full moon countenance, dearly loved to do nothing. He reckoned upon spending the rest of his days in the hunting lodge—*his* lodge. His two cows grazed in the forest, he had fuel for his needs; he worked in his garden instead of running about after delinquents. His neglect of his duties suited Gaubertin, and Courtecuisse and Gaubertin understood each other. So he never harassed the wood-stealers except to gratify his own petty hatreds. He persecuted girls who would not accede to his wishes, and people whom he disliked; but it was a long while now since he had borne any one a grudge, his easy ways had won popularity for him.

At the *Grand-I-Vert* a knife and fork was always set for Courtecuisse, the faggot-stealers were no longer

recalcitrant. Both he and his wife received tribute in kind from the marauders. This wood was stacked for him, his vines were layered and pruned. He had vassals and tributaries in all the delinquents, in fact.

Almost reassured as he had been as to his future by the words that Gaubertin let fall about those two acres to be his when the Aigues should be sold, he was rudely awakened from his dream by the General's dry remarks. After four years *he* stood revealed at last; the nature of the bourgeois had come out; he was determined to be cheated no longer. Courtecuisse took up his cap, his game-bag and gun, put on his gaiters, his belt stamped with the brand-new arms of Montcornet, and went forth to Ville-aux-Fayes, with the careless gait which hides the countryman's deepest thoughts. He looked along the woods as he went and whistled to his dogs.

'You complain of the Upholsterer,' said Gaubertin, when Courtecuisse had told his tale; 'why, your fortune is made! What! the ninny is giving you three francs for each prosecution and all the fines into the bargain, is he? If you can come to an understanding with your friends, he can have them, and as many as he likes. Prosecutions! let him have them by the hundred. When you have a thousand francs, you will be able to buy the *Bâchelerie*, Rigou's farm; you can be your own master and work on your own land, or rather, you can live at ease and set others to work. Only, mind this, you must arrange to prosecute nobody but those who are as poor as Job. You cannot shear those that have no wool. Take the Upholsterer's offer; let him pile up costs for himself if he has a liking for them. Tastes differ, and it takes all sorts to make a world. There was old Mariotte, in spite of all I could say, he liked losses better than profits.'

Courtecuisse went home again, profoundly impressed by Gaubertin's wisdom and consumed with a desire to

have a bit of land for himself and to be a master like the rest at last.

General Montcornet likewise returned, and on his way gave Sibilet an account of his expedition.

'Quite right, quite right, M. le Comte,' said the steward, rubbing his hands, 'but there must be no stopping short now you are on the right track. The rural policeman who allowed the spoliation to go on in our fields ought to be changed. It would be easy for M. le Comte to obtain the appointment of mayor of the commune, and to put some one else in Vaudoyer's place—some old soldier who would not be afraid to carry out orders. A great landowner should be master on his own property; and see what trouble we have with the present mayor!'

The mayor of the commune of Blangy, one Rigou, had been a Benedictine monk, but in the year 1 of the Republic he had married the servant-maid of the late curé of Blangy. A married monk was not likely to find much favour at the prefecture after the Restoration, but there was no one else to fill his post, and in 1815 Rigou was still mayor of Blangy. In 1817, however, the bishop had sent the Abbé Brossette to act as officiating priest of the parish. Blangy had done without a priest for twenty-five years, and, not unnaturally, a violent feud broke out between the apostate and the young churchman whose character has been previously sketched.

People had looked down upon Rigou, but the war between the mayor and the parson brought the former popularity. Rigou had been hated by the peasants for his usurious schemes, but now he was suddenly identified with their interests, political and financial, which were threatened (as they imagined) by the Restoration and the clergy.

Socquard of the *Café de la Paix* was the nominal subscriber to the *Constitutionnel*, the principal Liberal paper, but all the local functionaries joined in the subscription,

and the journal circulated through a score of hands after it left the Café till, at the end of the week, it came to Rigou, who passed it on to Langlumé, the miller, who gave the tattered fragments to any one who could read. The leading articles, written for Paris and the anti-religious *canards*, were seriously read and considered in the valley of the Aigues. Rigou became a hero after the pattern of the 'venerable' Abbé Grégoire; and as in the case of certain Parisian bankers, the purple cloak of popularity served to hide a multitude of sins.

At this particular moment, indeed, Rigou, the perjured monk, was looked upon as a local François Keller and a champion of the people, though at no very remote period he would not have dared to walk in the fields after dark lest he should be trapped and die an accidental death. Persecution for political opinion has such virtue that not merely does it increase a man's present importance, but it restores innocence to his past. Liberalism worked many miracles of this kind. But the unlucky paper, which had the wit to find the level of its readers in those days, and to be as dull, scandalous, gullible and besottedly disloyal as the ordinary public, of which the ordinary rank and file of mankind is composed, did, it may be, as much damage to private property as to the Church which it attacked.

Rigou flattered himself that a son of the people, reared by the Revolution, a Bonapartist general, in disgrace to boot, would be a sworn enemy of Bourbons and clericals. But the General had his own ideas, and had managed to avoid a visit from M. and Mme. Rigou when he first came to the Aigues.

The enormity of the General's blunder, afterwards made worse by a piece of insolence on the part of the Countess (the story will be related in its place) can only be recognised after a better acquaintance with the terrible figure of Rigou—the vampire of the valley.

If Montcornet had set out to win the mayor's good-

will, and courted his friendship, Rigou's influence might have neutralised Gaubertin's power. But far from making the overtures, Montcornet had brought three several actions against the ex-monk in the court of Ville-aux-Fayes; Rigou had already gained one case, but the other two were still in suspense. Then Montcornet's mind had been so busied over schemes for the gratification of his vanity, so full of his marriage, that he had forgotten Rigou; but now when Sibilet advised him to take Rigou's place himself, he called for post-horses and went straight to the prefect.

The General and the prefect, Count Martial de la Roche-Hugon, had been friends since the year 1804. The purchase of the Aigues had been determined by a hint let fall in Paris by the Councillor of State. La Roche-Hugon had been a prefect under Napoleon, and remained a prefect under the Bourbons, paying court to the Bishop so as to keep his place. Now his lordship had asked for Rigou's removal not once but many times, and Martial, who knew perfectly well how matters stood in the commune, was only too delighted by the General's request. In a month's time, Montcornet was mayor of Blangy.

While Montcornet was staying with his friend at the prefecture, it happened naturally enough that one Groison, a subaltern officer of the old Imperial Guard, came thither about his pension, which had been stopped on some pretext. The General had once already done the man a service, and, recollecting this, the gallant cavalry officer poured out the story of his woes. He had nothing whatever. Montcornet undertook to obtain the pension, and offered Groison the post of rural policeman at Blangy, and a way at the same time of repaying the obligation by devotion to his patron's interests. So the new mayor and the new rural policeman came into office together, and, as may be imagined, the General gave weighty counsel to his lieutenant.

Vaudoyer, whose bread was thus taken out of his mouth, was a peasant born on the Ronquerolles estate. He was the ordinary rural policeman, fit for nothing but to dawdle about and to make use of his position, so that he was made much of and cajoled by the peasants, who ask no better than to bribe subaltern authority and outpost sentinels of property. Vaudoyer knew Soudry; for a police-sergeant in the gendarmerie fulfils quasi-judicial functions, and the rural police naturally act as detectives if required. Soudry sent his man to Gaubertin, who gave a warm welcome to an old acquaintance, and the pair discussed Vaudoyer's wrongs over a friendly glass.

'My dear fellow,' said the mayor of Vive-aux-Fayes, who could suit himself to his company, 'the thing that has happened to you is in store for us all. The nobles have come back again, and the Emperor's nobles are making common cause with them. They mean to grind the people down, to establish the old customs and to take away our property; but we are Burgundians, we must defend ourselves and send those *Arminacs* back to Paris. You go back to Blangy; you can be watchman there for M. Polissard, who has taken the lease of the Ronquerolles woods. Never mind, my lad, I will find you plenty of work all the year round. But there is to be no trespassing there, mind you; the woods belong to *us*, and that would spoil it all. Send on all "wood-cutters" to the Aigues. And lastly, if there is any sale for faggots, tell the people to buy of us and not of the Aigues. You will be rural policeman again; this won't last long. The General will soon be sick of living among thieves. Did you know that yonder Upholsterer called me a thief? And I the son of one of the most honest Republicans! and the son-in-law of Mouchon, the famous representative of the people, who died without leaving a penny to pay for his funeral!'

The General raised *his* rural policeman's salary to three

hundred francs a year. He had a *mairie* built in Blangy, and installed Groison in the premises. Then he found a wife for that functionary in the orphan daughter of one of his own little tenants who owned three acres of vineyard. Groison felt a doglike affection for his master. His fidelity was admitted on all sides, and Groison was feared and respected, but much as an unpopular captain is respected and feared by his crew. The peasantry shunned him as if he had been a leper. They were silent when he came among them, or they disguised their dislike under an appearance of banter. Against such numbers he was powerless.

The delinquents amused themselves by inventing misdemeanours of which no cognisance could be taken, and the old warrior chafed at his impotence. For Groison his functions united the attractions of guerilla warfare with the pleasures of the chase. He hunted down offenders. But war had instilled into him the sportsmanlike instinct of acting openly and above-board, as it were, and he loathed the underhand schemings and thievish dexterity which caused him continual mortification. He very soon found out that the property of other landlords was respected, that it was only at the Aigues that this pilfering went on, and he felt sincere contempt for a peasantry ungrateful enough to rob a general of the Empire, a man so essentially kind-hearted and generous. Hate was soon added to contempt. But in vain did he try to be omnipresent; he could not be everywhere at once; and the delinquencies went on all over the woods at the same time. Groison made it plain to the General that he must organise a complete system of defence; his utmost zeal, he said, was insufficient to cope with the ill-will of the population of the valley, and he revealed its extent.

'There is something behind this, General,' he said; 'these people are too bold, they are afraid of nothing; it is as if they reckoned on Providence.'

'We shall see,' said the Count.

Unlucky words! A great statesman does not conjugate the verb 'to see' in the future tense.

At that time Montcornet had something else on his mind, a difficulty more pressing, as it seemed to him. He must find an *alter ego* to take his place as mayor while he was absent in Paris, and a mayor must of necessity be able to read and write. Looking over the whole commune, he found but one man to answer this description—this was Langlumé, the miller. He could not well have made a worse choice.

In the first place, the interests of the General-mayor and the miller-deputy-mayor were diametrically opposed; and in the second, Langlumé was mixed up in several shady transactions with Rigou, who lent him money in the way of business. The miller used to buy the right of pasture for his horses in the fields; thanks to his machinations indeed he had a monopoly, for Sibilet could not find another purchaser. All the grazing land in the valley commanded good prices, but the fields at the Aigues, the best land of all, was left to the last and fetched the least.

So Langlumé was appointed deputy-mayor for the time being, but in France 'for the time being' practically means 'once for all,' though Frenchmen are credited with a love of change. Langlumé, counselled by Rigou, feigned devotion to the General's interests, and became deputy-mayor about the time selected by the omnipotent chronicler for the beginning of the drama.

As soon as the new mayor had turned his back, Rigou, who of course was on the Council, had it all his own way at the Board, and the resolutions which he passed there were by no means in the General's interest. He voted money for schemes purely for the benefit of the peasants, though the Aigues must pay most of the rates, and indeed paid two-thirds of the taxes, or he refused grants of money which were really needed for supple-

menting the Abbé's stipend, for rebuilding the parsonage, or wages (*sic*) for a schoolmaster.

'If the peasants knew how to read and write, what would become of us?' said Langlumé, with ingenuous frankness. The Abbé Brossette had tried to induce a brother of the Order of the *Doctrine chrétienne* to come to Blangy, and the miller was endeavouring to justify to the General the anti-Liberal course taken by the Council.

The General returned from Paris, and so delighted was he with Groison's behaviour that he began to look up old soldiers of the Imperial Guard. He meant to organise his defence of the Aigues and put it on a formidable footing. By dint of looking about him, and making inquiries among his friends and officers on half-pay, he unearthed Michaud, an old quartermaster in the cuirassiers of the Guard, 'a tough morsel,' in soldier's language, a simile suggested by camp cookery, when a bean here and there resists the softening influences of the boiling pot. Michaud picked out three of his acquaintances to be foresters, without fear or blame.

The first of these, Steingel by name, was a thorough Alsacien, an illegitimate son of the general Steingel who fell during the time of Bonaparte's early successes in Italy. Steingel the younger was tall and strong, a soldier of a type accustomed, like the Russians, to complete and passive obedience. Nothing stopped him in his duty. If he had had his orders, he would have laid hands coolly on Emperor or Pope. He did not know what danger meant. He had served in the ranks with undaunted courage for sixteen years, and had never received a scratch. He slept out of doors or in his bed with stoical indifference, and at any aggravation of discomfort merely remarked, 'That is how things are to-day, it seems!'

Vatel, the second, was the child of his regiment; a corporal of light infantry, gay as a lark, a trifle light with the fair sex, utterly devoid of religious principle, and

brave to the verge of rashness, the man who would laugh as he shot down a comrade. He had no future before him, no idea of a calling, he saw a very amusing little war in the functions proposed to him; and as the Emperor and the Grand Army were his sole articles of faith, he swore to serve the brave Montcornet if the whole world were against him. His was a nature essentially combative; life without an enemy lost all its savour for him; he would have made an excellent attorney; he was a born detective. Indeed, as has been seen, but for the presence of the justice's clerk, he would have haled Granny Tonsard, faggot and all, out of the *Grand-I-Vert*, and the law in his person would have violated the sanctuary of the hearth.

The third, one Gaillard, a veteran promoted to be sub-lieutenant, and covered with scars, belonged to the labouring class of soldiers. Everything seemed to him to be alike indifferent after the Emperor's fate; but his indifference would carry him as far as Vatel's enthusiasm. He had a natural daughter to support, the place offered him a means of subsistence, and he took it as he would have enlisted in a regiment.

When the General went to the Aigues to dismiss Courtecuisse before his old soldiers came, he was amazed beyond expression at the man's impudent audacity. There are ways of obeying an order which supply a most cuttingly sarcastic commentary upon it, on the part of the slave who carries it out to the letter. Every relation between man and man can be reduced to an absurdity, and Courtecuisse had overstepped the limits of absurdity.

One hundred and twenty-six summonses had been taken out at the tribunal of the peace at Soulanges, which took cognisance of misdemeanours; and almost every one of the delinquents had an understanding with Courtecuisse. In sixty-nine cases judgment had been given, and duly registered and notices served upon the defendants.

Whereupon Brunet, delighted at such a fine windfall, did all that was necessary to arrive at the dreary point beyond which the arm of the law cannot reach, whence execution warrants return bearing the superscription 'No effects,' a formula by which the sheriff's-officer acquaints you with the fact that the person herein described, being in the direst poverty, is already stripped bare of all possession, and where there is nothing to be had, the creditor, like the crown, loses his rights—of suing. In the present instance the poverty-stricken individuals had been selected with discernment. They lived scattered over five communes round about; and when the sheriff's-officer and his two assistants, Vermichel and Fourchon, had duly gone to find each one, Brunet returned the warrants to Sibilet together with a statement of costs amounting to five thousand francs, and an intimation that he awaited the Comte de Montcornet's further instructions.

Provided with this file of documents, Sibilet waited on his employer, calmly pointed out that these were the results of a too summary order given to Courtecuisse, and was looking on, an unconcerned spectator of one of the most tremendous explosions of wrath ever seen in a French cavalry officer, when Courtecuisse came in at that particular moment to pay his respects and to ask for some eleven hundred francs, the promised bonus on these unlucky convictions. Then temper fairly got the upper hand of the General. He forgot his rank in the army, he forgot his count's coronet and became a plain trooper again, and poured out a torrent of insulting invective of which he would feel heartily ashamed a little later.

'Oh! eleven hundred francs?' cried he. 'Eleven hundred thousand drubbings! Eleven hundred thousand kicks! . . . Do you suppose that I am not up to your games? . . . Show me a clean pair of heels or I will break every bone in your skin!'

At the sight of the General grown purple in the face,

at the sound of the first words he uttered, Courtecuisse fled away like a swallow.

'M. le Comte,' said Sibilet, in the mildest accents, 'you are wrong.'

'Wrong! . . . *I?*'

'Good gracious, M. le Comte, mind what you are about; that rogue will prosecute you——'

'I do not care a rap. . . . Look here! that scoundrel goes this very moment. See that he takes nothing of mine away with him, and pay him his wages.'

Four hours later every tongue in the neighbourhood was wagging, as might be expected, over the news. It was said that the General had refused to pay Courtecuisse's wages, poor fellow; had kept two thousand francs belonging to him, and knocked him down.

Queer stories began to circulate. According to the latest reports, the master up at the Aigues had gone out of his mind. Next day Brunet, who had drawn up the execution warrants for the General, served him with a summons to appear before the tribunal. The lion had many fly-pricks in store for him, and this was but the beginning of his troubles.

There are various forms to be gone through before a forester can be installed; for one thing, he must take the oath in a Court of First Instance. Several days elapsed, therefore, before the three new foresters were properly qualified officials. The General had written to Michaud. He and his newly married wife must come at once, though the lodge was not yet ready for them; but the future head-forester was too busy to leave Paris, his wife's relations had come for the wedding, and it was impossible for him to get away for another fortnight. All through that fortnight, and while the formalities were being completed, with no good grace, at Ville-aux-Fayes, the wood-stealing was in full swing, there was no one in charge of the forest, and the marauders made the utmost of their opportunities.

The sudden portent of three new foresters made a great sensation in the valley from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes. There was that in the appearance of the three stalwart figures, clad in a grand green uniform (the Emperor's colour) which plainly said that these were stout fellows, active and sturdy-legged, the sort of men who might be expected to spend their nights in the forest.

There was but one in the whole canton to give the veterans a welcome, and that one was Groison the rural policeman. In his delight at such reinforcements he let drop a few threatening hints, how that before long the thieves should find themselves in a tight place, and unable to do any mischief. So the formal declaration of war was not omitted in this covert but fierce struggle.

Then Sibilet called the Count's attention to another fact, to wit, that the gendarmerie at Soulanges in general and police-sergeant Soudry in particular were in reality his uncompromising foes, and pointed out how useful a brigade might be, if imbued with the proper spirit.

'With the right kind of corporal and gendarmes devoted to your interests, you could do as you liked with the neighbourhood,' said he.

The Count hurried to the prefecture, and at his instance the divisionary commandant put Soudry on the retired list, and replaced him by one Viollet, a gendarme from the market town. The man bore an excellent character, and both commandant and prefect commended him highly. The whole Soulanges brigade was broken up and distributed over the department by the colonel of gendarmerie (one of Montcornet's old chums), and a new brigade was reconstructed of picked men, who received secret instructions to see that Montcornet's property was not attacked in future, together with a particular caution not to allow the inhabitants of Soulanges to gain them over.

This last revolution was accomplished so quickly that it was impossible to thwart it; it spread dismay through Ville-aux-Fayes and Soulanges. Soudry regarded himself as absolutely destitute, and bitter were his complaints, till Gaubertin contrived to carry his appointment as mayor, so that the control of the gendarmerie might still be in his hands.

Great was the outcry against this tyranny. Montcornet was generally hated. It was not merely that he had changed the course of half-a-dozen human lives, he had wounded the vanity of several fellow-creatures; and the peasantry, excited by hints dropped by the townspeople at Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes, or uttered by Rigou, Langlumé, or Guerbet (the postmaster at Conches), imagined that they were about to lose their 'rights,' as they called them.

The General hushed up the dispute with his sometime forester by paying all claims in full; and as for Courtecuisse, he gave two thousand francs for a little bit of land that lay by a cover side, within the Montcornet estate. Old Rigou, who could never be persuaded to part with the *Bâchelerie* (as it was called), took a malicious pleasure in selling it now to Courtecuisse at a profit of fifty per cent. The ex-forester, moreover, became one of Rigou's many creatures, for he only paid down half the purchase-money, and the unpaid half gave the old money-lender a hold upon him.

Then began a life of guerilla warfare for Michaud, his three foresters, and Groison. Unweariedly they tramped through the woods, lay out in them of nights, and set themselves to acquire that intimate knowledge which is the forest-keeper's science, and economises his time. They watched the outlets, grew familiar with the localities of the timber, trained their ears to detect the meaning of every crash of boughs, of every different forest sound. Then they studied all the faces of the neighbourhood, the different families of the various

villages were all passed in review, the habits and characters of the different individuals were noted, together with the ways in which they worked for a living. And all this was a harder task than you may imagine. The peasants who lived on the Aigues, seeing how carefully these new measures had been concerted, opposed a dumb resistance, a feint of acquiescence which baffled this intelligent police supervision.

Michaud and Sibilet took a dislike to each other from the very first. The steward's discontented looks, his combined sleekness and gruff manner were hateful to the straightforward outspoken soldier, the flower of the Young Guard. At first sight of his colleague he called him 'a queer fish' in his own mind. It was not lost upon him that Sibilet always raised objections whenever any measure was proposed which went to the root of the mischief, and invariably advocated courses where success was doubtful. Instead of calming the General, Sibilet continually irritated him, as this brief sketch must have shown already; he was always urging him to take strong measures, always trying to frighten him by multiplying trouble, by making the most of trifles, by confronting him with old difficulties which sprang up again unconquered. Michaud did not guess that Sibilet had deliberately accepted the part of spy on Montcornet and evil genius; that ever since his installation he had made up his mind to serve two masters, and finally to choose the one that best suited his interests—Montcornet or Gaubertin; but the soldier saw very plainly the steward's grasping and base nature, and could in no wise square this with honesty of purpose. Nor was the deep-seated aversion which separated the pair altogether displeasing to Montcornet. Michaud's personal dislike led him to watch the steward as he would never have condescended to do had the General asked him. And as for Sibilet, he fawned on the head-forester and cringed to him, yet could not induce the true-hearted soldier to lay aside

the excessive civility which he set as a barrier between them.

After these explanatory details the position of the General's various enemies, and the drift of his conversation with his two ministers ought to be perfectly intelligible.

IX

OF MEDIOCRACY

'WELL, Michaud, is it anything new?' asked Montcornet, after the Countess had left the dining-room.

'If you will take my advice, General, we will not talk of business here; walls have ears, and I should like to feel sure that what we are going to say will fall into none but our own.'

'Very well,' said the General; 'then let us go out and walk along the field-path towards Sibilet's house; we may be sure that no one will overhear us there.'

A few minutes later, while the Countess went to the Avonne gate with the Abbé Brossette and Blondet, the General strolled through the fields with Sibilet and Michaud, and heard the history of the affair at the *Grand-I-Vert*.

'Vatel was in the wrong,' was Sibilet's comment.

'They made him see that pretty clearly by blinding him,' returned Michaud. 'But that is nothing. You know our plan of taking the cattle of the convicted delinquents, General? Well, we shall never succeed. Brunet and his colleague Plissoud likewise will never co-operate loyally with us. They will always contrive to warn the people beforehand. Vermichel, Brunet's assistant bailiff, went to find old Fourchon at the *Grand-I-Vert*. Marie Tonsard is Bonnébault's sweetheart, so

as soon as she heard about it she went to give the alarm at Conches. As a matter of fact the depredations are beginning again.'

'Some very decided step is more and more called for every day,' said Sibilet.

'What did I tell you?' cried the General. 'Those judgments which condemned the offender to imprisonment in lieu of a fine must be enforced. If they do not pay me damages and costs they shall go to prison instead.'

'They think that the law cannot touch them, and say among themselves that no one will dare to arrest them,' Sibilet answered. 'They fancy that they can frighten you! Some one backs them at Ville-aux-Fayes, for the public prosecutor seems to have forgotten the matter of the condemnations.'

'I believe,' said Michaud, seeing that the General looked thoughtful, 'that by going to a good deal of expense you may still save your property.'

'Better spend money than proceed to extreme measures,' said Sibilet.

'Then what is your plan?' Montcornet asked, turning to his head-forester.

'It is quite simple,' said Michaud; 'it is a question of enclosing your park. We should be left in peace then, for any trifling damage done to the woods would be a criminal offence, and as such would be sent to the court of assize for trial.'

Sibilet laughed. 'At nine francs per rod the building materials alone would cost one-third of the actual value of the property,' he said.

'There, there!' Montcornet broke in. 'I shall go at once, and see the attorney-general.'

'The attorney-general may be of the same opinion as the public prosecutor,' Sibilet remarked suavely; 'such negligence looks as if there was an understanding between the two.'

'Very good, that remains to be found out!' cried Montcornet. 'If everybody has to be sent packing, judges, public prosecutor, and the rest of them, attorney-general and all; I shall go if need be to the Keeper of the Seals about it, or to the King himself!'

A piece of energetic pantomime on Michaud's part made the General turn round upon Sibilet with a 'Good day, my dear sir.' The steward took the hint.

'Is it M. le Comte's intention as mayor,' he said as he took leave, 'to take the necessary steps towards putting a stop to the abuse of gleaning? The harvest is about to begin, and if public notice is to be given that no one will be allowed to glean unless they belong to the commune, and are duly provided with a certificate, we have no time to lose.'

'You and Groison settle it between you!' answered the General. 'In dealing with such people as these, the law must be carried out to the letter.'

And so in a moment of vexation the system which Sibilet had vainly urged for a fortnight gained the day, and found favour in Montcornet's eyes during the heat of anger caused by Vatel's mishap.

When Sibilet was a hundred paces away, the Count spoke in a low voice to his head-forester.

'Well, Michaud, my good fellow, what is the matter?'

'You have an enemy in your own household, General, and you trust him with plans that you ought not to tell to your own foraging cap.'

'I share your suspicions, my good friend,' Montcornet answered, 'but I will not make the same mistake twice. I am waiting till you understand the management to put you in Sibilet's place, and Vatel can take yours. And yet, what fault have I to find with Sibilet? He is accurate and honest; so far he has not appropriated a hundred francs, and he has been here for five years. His nature is as odious as it can possibly be, and all is said. Besides, what object has he to gain?'

'He most certainly has one, General,' Michaud said gravely, 'and if you give me leave I will find it out. A purse with a thousand francs in it will loosen that old rogue Fourchon's tongue, though after this morning's performance I suspect that old Fourchon trims his sails to suit every wind. They mean to force you to sell the Aigues, so that old scoundrel of a ropemaker told me. You may be sure of this: there is not a peasant, a small tradesman, farmer or publican, between Conches and Ville-aux-Fayes but has his money ready against the day of spoil. Fourchon let me know that his son-in-law, Tonsard, has fixed his choice already. The notion that you will sell the Aigues prevails in the valley; it is like a pestilence in the air. Very probably the steward's lodge and a few acres of land round about it will be the price of Sibilet's services as spy. Not a thing do we say among ourselves here, but it is known in Ville-aux-Fayes. Sibilet is related to your enemy Gaubertin. The remark that you let fall just now about the attorney-general will, as likely as not, reach him before you can be at the prefecture. You do not know the people hereabouts!'

'Know them?—I know that they are the scum of the earth. To think of giving way before such blackguards! Oh! I would a hundred times sooner set fire to the Aigues myself,' cried the General.

'Let us not set fire to it; let us plan out a line of conduct which will baffle their Lilliputian stratagems. To hear them talk, they have made up their minds to go all lengths against you; and, by the by, General, speaking of fire, you ought to insure all your houses and farm buildings.'

'Oh! Michaud, do you know what they mean by "the Upholsterer"? Yesterday as I came along by the Thune the little chaps called out "There is the Upholsterer!" and ran away.'

'Sibilet would be the one to tell you that,' said

Michaud down-heartedly; 'he likes to see you in a passion. But since you ask me—well, it is a nickname those blackguards have given you, General.'

'Why?'

'Why, on your—your father's account, General.'

'Ah! the curs!' shouted the general, turning white with rage. 'Yes, Michaud, my father was a furniture dealer, a cabinet-maker. The Countess knows nothing about it. Oh! that ever!——Eh, though, after all, I have set queens and empresses dancing. I will tell her everything this evening,' he exclaimed after a pause.

'They say that you are a coward,' Michaud went on.

'Ha!'

'They want to know how it was that you got off safely at Essling when you left nearly all your regiment there——'

This accusation drew a smile from the General.

'Michaud, I am going to the prefecture,' he said, still under some kind of strong excitement, 'if it is only to take out insurance policies. Tell the Countess that I have gone. They want war, do they? They shall have it. I will amuse myself by upsetting their schemes for them—these Soulanges tradesmen and their peasants. We are in the enemy's country; we must mind what we are about. Impress it upon the foresters that they must keep well within the law. Poor Vatel, look after him. The Countess has been frightened; she must know nothing of all this; if she did she would never come here again!'

Yet neither the General nor Michaud himself knew the real nature of their peril. Michaud had too lately come to this Burgundian valley; he had no idea of the enemy's strength, although he saw the influences at work; and as for the General, he put too much faith in the power of legislation.

The laws, as fabricated by the modern legislator, have not all the virtue with which they are credited. They

are not even carried out equally all over the country; they are modified in application until the practice flatly contradicts the spirit in which they were framed; and this is a patent fact in every epoch. What historian would be so benighted as to lay down the statement that the decrees of the strongest governments have been equally enforced all over France at once? or that in the time of the Convention, the requisitions of men, stores, and money, pressed as heavily upon Provence, or Lower Normandy, or the borders of Brittany, as upon the population of the great centres of civil life? Where is the philosopher who will deny that two men in two neighbouring departments may commit the same crime, and one will lose his head, and the other, and perhaps the worse villain of the two, keeps his upon his shoulders. We must have equality in life, forsooth, and we have inequality in the administration of the law, and in the penalty of death.

As soon as the population of a city reaches a certain limit, the administrative methods are no longer the same. There are about a hundred cities in France in which the intelligence of the citizens is capable of looking beyond the expediency of the present moment, and discerning the wider problems which the law attempts to solve; there the law is intelligently enforced, but in the rest of France, where people understand nothing but their own immediate interests, anything which may interfere with these is a dead letter. Over one half of France, roughly speaking, the *vis inertiæ* neutralises the action of legislation of every description. Let it be clearly understood, however, that this passive resistance does not extend to certain essentials of political existence, such as the payment of imperial taxes, the conscription, the punishment of heinous crime; but every attempt in legislation to deal with other than broadly recognised necessities, to touch ways of life, private interests or certain forms of abuse, is frustrated by a common con-

sent of reluctance. Even now, while this work is passing through the press, it is easy to discern the signs of this resistance, the same with which Louis XIV. came into collision in Brittany. Seeing the deplorable state of things caused by the game laws, there are those who will make an annual sacrifice of some twenty or thirty human lives to preserve a few animals.

For a French population of twenty millions the law is nothing but a sheet of white paper nailed to the church door or pinned up in the mayor's office. Hence Mouche's words 'the papers,' an expression for authority. Many a mayor of a canton (putting simple mayors of communes out of the question) makes paper bags for seeds or raisins out of sheets of the *Bulletin des Lois.* And as to the mayors of communes, one would be afraid to say how many there are of them that can neither read nor write, or to ask how the registers are kept up in their districts. Every serious administration is no doubt perfectly aware of the gravity of the situation; doubtless, too, it will diminish; but there is something else which Centralisation—so much declaimed against in France, where we declaim against any great thing which has any use or strength in it—which Centralisation will never reach, and this power against which it is shattered is the same power with which General Montcornet was about to come into collision—for want of a better name it may be called *Mediocracy.*

Great was the outcry against the tyranny of the nobles; and to-day we shriek against the capitalist and abuses of power which perhaps after all are only the inevitable chafings of that social yoke, styled the *Contract* by Rousseau; we hear of constitutions here and charters there, of king and czar and the English Parliament; but the levelling process which began in 1789 and made a fresh start in 1830 has in reality paved the way for the muddle-headed domination of the bourgeoisie and delivered France over to them. The presentment of a

fact seen unhappily but too often in these days, to wit, the enslavement of a canton, a little town, or a sub-prefecture by a single family, the history of the manner in which a Gaubertin contrived to gain this local ascendency when the Restoration was in full swing, will give a better idea of the crying evil than any quantity of flat assertions. Many an oppressed district will recognise the truth of the picture, and many an obscure down-trodden victim will find in this brief *hic jacet* a publicity given to his private griefs which sometimes soothes them.

When the General concluded a purely imaginary truce for renewed hostilities, his ex-steward had pretty much completed the network of threads in which he held Ville-aux-Fayes and the whole district round it. It will be better to give, in as few words as possible, an account of the various ramifications of the Gaubertin family, for by means of his kin he had involved the whole country in his toils, something as the boa-constrictor winds itself about a tree-trunk so cunningly that the passing traveller mistakes the serpent for some Asiatic vegetable product.

In the year 1793 there were three brothers of the name of Mouchon in the Avonne valley. (It was about that time that the name of the valley was changed; hitherto it had been the valley of the Aigues; now the hated name of the old manor fell out of use and it became the Avonne valley.)

The oldest of the brothers, a steward of the manor of Ronquerolles, became a deputy of the department under the Convention. He took a hint from his friend Gaubertin senior (the public accuser who saved the Soulanges family), and in like manner saved the lives and property of the Ronquerolles. This brother had two daughters; one of them married Gendrin the barrister, the other became the wife of François Gaubertin. Finally, he died in 1804.

The second brother obtained the post-house at Conches

gratis, thanks to the elder's influence. His daughter, his sole offspring and heiress, married a well-to-do farmer in the neighbourhood, Guerbet by name. He died in 1817.

But the youngest of the Mouchons took holy orders. He was curé of Ville-aux-Fayes before the Revolution, curé again after the restoration of the Catholic religion, and now the year 1823 still found him curé of the little metropolis. He had formerly declined the oath, and in consequence for a long time had kept out of sight and lived in the 'hermitage' at the Aigues, protected by the Gaubertins, father and son; and now, at the age of sixty-seven, he enjoyed the affection and esteem of his whole parish, for all his characteristics were common to his flock. He was parsimonious to the verge of avarice, was reported to be very rich, and these rumours of wealth strengthened the respect which he met with on all sides. His lordship the bishop thought very highly of the Abbé Mouchon, usually spoken of as 'the venerable curé of Ville-aux-Fayes'; it was well known there that the bishop had pressed him more than once to accept a superb living at the prefecture, and his repeated refusals, no less than his reputation for riches, had endeared the curé Mouchon to fellow-inhabitants.

At this time Gaubertin, mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes, found a solid supporter in his brother-in-law, M. Gendrin, president of the Court of First Instance, while his own son—now the busiest solicitor in the place, and a by-word in the arrondissement—talked already of selling his practice after five years. He meant to be a barrister, and to succeed to his uncle Gendrin when the latter retired. President Gendrin's only son was registrar of mortgages.

Soudry junior, who had fulfilled the functions of public prosecutor for two years, was one of Gaubertin's zealous adherents. Clever Mme. Soudry had done her part. She had strengthened her husband's son's present

position by immense expectations when she married him to Rigou's only daughter. One day the public prosecutor would inherit a double fortune, the ex-monk's money would come to him as well as Soudry's savings, and the young fellow would be one of the wealthiest and most important men in the department.

The sub-prefect of Ville-aux-Fayes was a M. des Lupeaulx, a nephew of the secretary of a State department. He was meant to marry Mlle. Élise Gaubertin, the mayor's youngest daughter. Like her eldest sister, she had a portion of two hundred thousand francs, *besides expectations*. Young des Lupeaulx had unwittingly done a clever thing on first coming to the place in 1819 when he fell straightway in love with Elise; but for his eligibility as a suitor, he would long since have been compelled to ask for an exchange, but as it was, he belonged prospectively to the Gaubertin clan, whose chieftain's eyes were fixed less upon the nephew than upon the uncle in Paris. For all the uncle's influence, in his nephew's interest, was at Gaubertin's disposition.

And so the church, the magistracy, permanent and removable, the municipality and the administration, the four feet of power, walked at the mayor's will.

This power was strengthened in regions above and below its immediate sphere of action by the following means:—

The department in which Ville-aux-Fayes is situated is sufficiently populous to nominate six deputies. Ever since the creation of the Left-Centre in the Chamber, Ville-aux-Fayes had been represented by Leclercq, who, it may be remembered, was Gaubertin's son-in-law and the agent in charge of the city wine-cellars, and since had become a governor of the Bank of France. The number of electors which this well-to-do valley furnished to the grand electoral college was sufficiently considerable to ensure the election of M. de Ronquerolles (the patron acquired, as explained, by the Mouchon family),

even if an arrangement had to be made. The electors of Ville-aux-Fayes gave their support to the prefect on condition that the Marquis de Ronquerolles should continue to be elected by the grand college. So Gaubertin, the first to hit upon this electioneering expedient, was in good odour at the prefecture, which he saved many disappointments. The prefect managed to return three out-and-out Ministerialists, as well as two deputies for the Left-Centre, and as one of these two last was a governor of the Bank of France, and the other the Marquis de Ronquerolles, the Comte du Sérizy's brother-in-law, there was little to alarm the Cabinet. So the Ministry of the Interior looked upon the elections in this particular department as very well regulated.

The Comte de Soulanges, a peer of France, a Marshal-designate, and a faithful adherent of the House of Bourbon, knew that his estates and woods were well managed and properly guarded by Soudry and Lupin the notary. He might be considered to be Gendrin's patron, for he had successively procured for him the posts of judge and president, with the co-operation of M. de Ronquerolles.

MM. Leclercq and de Ronquerolles took their seats in the Centre-Left, and towards the Left rather than to the Centre side, a position in politics which presents numerous advantages to those who can change their political conscience like a suit of clothes.

M. Leclercq's brother had obtained the post of tax-collector at Ville-aux-Fayes, and Leclercq himself, the banker-deputy of the arrondissement, had recently purchased a fine estate, bringing in thirty thousand francs a year, together with a park and a château, the whole lying just outside the town—a position which enabled him to influence the whole canton.

In these ways Gaubertin had power in the higher regions of the State, in the two Chambers, and in the Cabinet; he could count upon influence both potent

and active, and as yet he had not weakened it by asking for trifles, nor strained it by too many serious demands.

Councillor Gendrin, appointed vice-president by the Chamber, was the real power in the Court-Royal. The First President, one of the three Ministerialist deputies returned by the department, and an indispensable orator of the Centre, was away for half the year, and left his court to vice-president Gendrin.

The prefect himself was another deputy, and the prefect's right hand was a member of his council, a cousin of Sarcus the justice, called Money-Sarcus by way of distinction. But for the family considerations which bound Gaubertin and young des Lupeaulx, Mme. Sarcus's brother would have been 'put forward' as sub-prefect of the arrondissement of Ville-aux-Fayes. Mme. Sarcus (wife of Money-Sarcus) was a Vallat of Soulanges, and related to the Gaubertins. It was said of her that she had shown a preference for the notary Lupin when he was a young man; and now, though she was a woman of five-and-forty, with a grown-up son, an assistant-surveyor, Lupin never went to the prefecture but he paid his respects to Mme. Money-Sarcus, or dined with her.

The nephew of Guerbet, the postmaster, was, as we have seen, the son of the Soulanges tax-collector, and filled the important post of examining magistrate at the tribunal of Ville-aux-Fayes. The third magistrate was a Corbinet, son of the notary of that name, and, of course, belonged body and soul to the all-powerful mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes, and (to close the list of legal functionaries) the deputy magistrate was Vigor junior, son of the lieutenant of gendarmerie.

Now Sibilet's father, who had been clerk of the court ever since there had been a court at all, had married his sister to M. Vigor, the aforesaid lieutenant of gendarmerie at Ville-aux-Fayes. Sibilet himself, good man, was a

father of six, and a cousin of Gaubertin's father through his wife, a Gaubertin-Vallat.

Only eighteen months ago the united efforts of both deputies, of M. de Soulanges and President Gendrin, had successfully created a post of commissary of police and filled it. The elder Sibilet's second son had the appointment. Sibilet's eldest daughter had married M. Hervé, a schoolmaster; within a year of the marriage his establishment was transformed, and Ville-aux-Fayes received the boon of a head-master of a grammar school.

Another Sibilet, Maître Corbinet's clerk, looked to the Gaubertins, Leclercqs, and Soudrys to be his sureties when the time should come for buying his employer's practice; and the youngest found employment in the Inland Revenue Department for the time being, with a prospect of succeeding to the position of Registrar when the present occupant should reach the limit of service prescribed for obtaining a pension.

Sibilet's youngest daughter, a girl of sixteen, was engaged to be married to Captain Corbinet, Maître Corbinet's brother, master of the post-office, and this completes the history of the Sibilet family.

The postmaster at Ville-aux-Fayes was Vigor senior, brother-in-law of Leclercq of the city cellars. He commanded the National Guard. Mme. Sibilet's sister, an elderly spinster and a Gaubertin-Vallat, held the office of stamp distributor.

Look where you liked in Ville-aux-Fayes, you found some member of the invisible coalition, headed avowedly (for the fact was openly recognised by great and small) by the mayor, the general agent of the timber trade—Monsieur Gaubertin!

If you left the seat of the sub-prefecture and went further down the Avonne valley, you found Gaubertin again ruling Soulanges through the Soudrys, and Lupin the deputy-mayor, the steward of the manor of Soulanges, in constant communication with the Count; through

Sarcus, justice of the peace, and his son's wife's father; through Guerbet the tax-collector and Gourdon the doctor, who had married a Gendrin-Vattebled. Gaubertin governed Blangy through Rigou, and Conches through the postmaster, whose word was law in his own commune. And by the way in which the ambitious mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes spread his influence far and wide in the Avonne valley, it may be imagined how far he made himself felt in the rest of the arrondissement.

The head of the firm of Leclercq was put forward as principal deputy. It had been agreed upon from the very first that he would relinquish his place to Gaubertin so soon as he himself should obtain the post of receiver-general of the department. Young Soudry, the public prosecutor, was to become attorney-general to the Court-Royal; while the rich examining-magistrate Guerbet was to be one of the councillors. This general promotion, far from being oppressive, was to ensure the advancement of others, such for instance as Vigor the deputy-magistrate, or François Vallat, Money-Sarcus's wife's cousin, at present only prosecutor-substitute. In fact all the ambitious young men in the valley, and every family which had anything to gain, were so many supporters of the coalition.

Gaubertin's influence was so serious and so powerful in the district that its secret springs of wealth, the savings hoarded up by the Rigous, Soudrys, Gendrins, Guerbets, and Lupins, nay, by Money-Sarcus himself, were all controlled by him. Ville-aux-Fayes, moreover, believed in its mayor. Gaubertin's ability was not more cried up than his honesty and his readiness to oblige. He was at the service of all his relations; there was not one of his constituents but could claim his help; but it was a game of give and take. His town council looked up to him. Wherefore the whole department blamed M. Mariotte of Auxerre for crossing good M. Gaubertin's path.

The Ville-aux-Fayes townspeople took their abilities for granted, since nothing had ever occurred to put them to the test; they prided themselves simply and solely on having no outsiders among them, and thought themselves excellent patriots. Thus nothing escaped this tyranny, so carefully thought out that it was scarcely recognised as tyranny, for the spectacle of natives filling every high place struck the ordinary mind as a triumph of native intellect. For instance, when the Liberal Opposition declared war against the Bourbons of the elder branch, Gaubertin saw an opening for a natural son of his, for whom he was at a loss to provide. His wife did not know of the existence of this Bournier, as he was called, who for a long time had been kept in Paris. Leclercq had looked after him till he became a foreman in a printing office, but now Gaubertin set him up as a printer in the town of Ville-aux-Fayes. Acting on the prompting of his protector, the young fellow brought out a newspaper three times a week, and the *Courrier de l'Avonne* began by taking away the official announcements from the paper of the prefecture. This local sheet, while supporting the Ministry, inclined to the Centre-Left, and obtained a large circulation by publishing a summary of the market reports of Burgundy; but in reality it was worked in the interests of the Rigou-Gaubertin-Soudry triumvirate. Young Bournier, the head of a fairly large establishment which already began to pay very well, paid court to one of attorney Maréchal's daughters, and appeared to be well received.

There was one outsider in the great Avonnaise family in the person of the district surveyor; but the greatest efforts were being made to exchange the stranger for a native Sarcus, Money-Sarcus's son, and in all likelihood this broken thread in the mesh would very shortly be repaired.

The formidable league which filled every public and private position with its own members, draining the

wealth of the neighbourhood, and clinging to power as the remora clings to the ship's keel, was not visible at first sight. General Montcornet had no suspicion of it, and the prefecture congratulated itself upon the flourishing condition of Ville-aux-Fayes. At the Home Office it was said: 'There is a model sub-prefecture for you, everything there goes on wheels! If all arrondissements were like that one, how happy we should be!' And family cliques came so effectually to the aid of local feeling, that here as in many another little town, nay, prefecture, any outsider appointed to an official position would have been forced to leave the district within the year.

The victim of all-powerful bourgeois clannishness is so thoroughly entangled and gagged that he does not dare to complain; like the intruding snail in a beehive, he is sealed up, be-waxed and be-glued. There are great inducements to this course of invisible, intangible tyranny; there is the strong desire to be among one's own people, to see after one's own bits of property; there is the mutual help which relatives can afford, and the guarantees given to the administration by the fact that its agent is working under the eyes of his fellow-citizens and amenable to local public opinion. Moreover, nepotism is not confined to little country towns; it is quite as common in higher branches of the civil service. But what is the actual outcome? Local interests triumph over wider and larger considerations; the intentions of the central government in Paris are completely defeated, the real facts of the case are twisted out of all knowledge, the province laughs in the face of the central authority. Great national necessities once supplied, in fact, the remaining laws, generally speaking, instead of modifying the character of the people are modified by them, and the masses, instead of adapting themselves to the law, adapt the law to themselves.

Any one who has travelled in the south or west of

France, or in Alsace (unless indeed he travels simply for the sake of seeing landscapes and public monuments and sleeping in the inns), must admit that these observations are just. As yet the effects of bourgeois nepotism only appear as isolated symptoms, but the tendencies of recent legislation will aggravate the disease, and this domination of dulness may cause fearful evils, as will be abundantly evident in the course of this drama in the Aigues valley.

Under old systems, overturned more rashly than is generally thought, under the Monarchy and the Empire, this kind of abuse was kept in check by an upper hierarchy; a counterpoise was found in class distinctions which were senselessly denominated 'privilege.' But as soon as a general scramble up the soaped pole of authority begins, 'privilege' ceases to exist. Would it not be wise, moreover, to recognise at once that since there must be a 'privileged class,' it had better consist of those who are openly and avowedly privileged? that those who have taken their position by stratagem and intrenched themselves in it by cunning, private self-seeking, and fraudulent imitations of public spirit, are only doing the work of despotism over again on a fresh foundation and a notch lower in the social scale? Shall we not have overthrown a race of noble tyrants who had the interests of their country at heart, only to create a race of self-seeking tyrants in their stead? Shall authority issue from cellars instead of spreading its influence from its natural place? These things should be borne in mind. The Parochialism just portrayed will gain ground in the Chamber of Deputies.

Montcornet's friend, the Comte de la Roche-Hugon, had been dismissed a short time before the General's last visit. This dismissal drove the stateman into the Liberal Opposition; he became one of the leading lights of the Left, and then promptly deserted his party for an embassy. To him succeeded, luckily for Montcornet, a son-in-law of the Marquis de Troisville, the Comte de

Castéran, Mme. de Montcornet's uncle, who received him as a relation, and graciously begged him to renew his acquaintance with the prefecture. The Comte de Castéran listened to Montcornet's complaints, and asked the bishop, the colonel of gendarmerie, the attorney-general, Councillor Sarcus, and the commandant of the division, to meet him at breakfast on the following day.

Baron Bourlac, the attorney-general, first brought into prominence by the trials of La Chanterie and Rifaël, was a man of a kind invaluable to a government, by reason of his staunch support of any party in power. He owed his elevation to a fanatical worship of the Emperor, and his continuance in his judicial rank partly to an inflexible nature, partly to the professional conscience which he brought to the performance of his duties. As a public prosecutor he had once ruthlessly hunted out the remnants of Chouannerie, now he prosecuted Bonapartists with equal zeal. But time and storms had softened him down and, as most frequently happens, the hero of terrific legends had grown charming in his ways and manner.

The Comte de Montcornet set forth his position, and mentioned his head-forester's fears. Then he began to talk about the necessity of making examples and of maintaining the cause of property.

His audience of high officials heard him out with solemn faces, giving him vague generalities by way of answer.—'Oh, of course, of course, force should be on the side of the law.—Your cause is the cause of every landowner.—We will give the matter our attention, but in our position we are obliged to be very careful.—A monarchy is bound to do more for the people than the people would do for themselves if they were sovereign rulers as in 1793.—The people have heavy burdens; our duty to them is as clear as our duty to you.'

Then the inexorable attorney-general suavely set forth

various thoughtful and benevolent views touching the lower orders, which would have convinced future constructors of Utopias that the higher ranks of the officialdom of that day were not unacquainted with the knotty points of the problem to be solved by modern society.

It may not be out of place to say here, that at this very time, during the Epoch of the Restoration, sanguinary collisions were very common all over the kingdom, and upon this very point in question. Wood-stealing and other peasants' encroachments were regarded as vested interests. The Court and the Ministry strongly objected to all disturbances of this kind and to the bloodshed consequent upon forcible repression, successful and unsuccessful. It was felt that severity was needed, but the local authorities were made to feel that they had blundered if the peasants were put down harshly, and if on the other hand they showed any weakness they were cashiered. So prefects were apt to equivocate when these deplorable accidents happened.

At the very outset Money-Sarcus had made a sign (unseen by Montcornet) which the prefect and public-prosecutor both understood, a sign which changed the tone of the conversation that followed. The attorney-general knew pretty much how things were in the Aigues valley through his assistant, young Soudry.

'I can see that there will be a terrible struggle,' the public-prosecutor had told his chief (he had come over from Ville-aux-Fayes on purpose to see him). 'We shall have gendarmes killed—I know that from my spies; and the trial will be an ugly business. No jury will be got to convict with a prospect of the hatred of twenty or thirty families before them; they will not give us the heads of the murderers, nor the amount of penal servitude which we shall require for the accomplices. The utmost we should obtain, if you conducted the prosecution in person, would be a few years' imprisonment for the worst offenders. It is better to shut our eyes, for if we keep

them open the end of it all will be a collision which will cost lives, and perhaps six thousand francs to the Government, to say nothing of the expense of keeping the men in the hulks. That is paying dear for a victory which will make the weakness of justice apparent to all eyes.'

Montcornet was incapable of suspecting the influence of 'mediocracy' in the valley, so he never so much as mentioned Gaubertin, who stirred up and rekindled the smouldering flames.

When breakfast was over, the Baron took Montcornet's arm and carried him off to the prefect's study. When they issued from this conference Montcornet wrote to his wife that he was setting out for Paris, and should not return for a week. The wisdom of the measures advised by Baron Bourlac will be seen later on, when they were carried into execution. If a way yet remained to the Aigues of escaping the 'ill-will,' it was only through the policy which Bourlac privately recommended to Montcornet.

These explanations will seem tedious to those who care for nothing but the interest of the story, but it is worth while to observe here that the historian of manners is bound by rules even more stringent than those which control the historian of fact. The historian of manners is bound to make everything appear probable—even truth itself, while, in the domain of history proper, the impossible requires no apology; these facts actually happened, and the writer simply records them. The ups and downs of family and social life are created by a host of small causes, and every one of these has a bearing on the event.

The man of science must clear away the masses of an avalanche which swept away whole villages, to show you the fallen fragments of stone on the mountain side where the mass of snow first began to gather. If this were merely the story of a man's suicide—there are five

hundred suicides in Paris every year—it is a hackneyed melodrama, and every one is content with the briefest account of the victim's motives; but that Property should commit suicide!—who will believe it, in these days when wealth appears to be dearer than life itself? *De re vestra agitur*, wrote the fabulist—this story touches the interests of all owners of property. Let it be borne in mind that if a canton and a little country town are in league, in the present instance, against an old General who, despite his reckless courage, had escaped the hazards of countless previous battles, the same kind of conspiracy is set on foot, in more than one department, against men who are striving for the general good. Every man of genius, every great statesman, every great agricultural reformer, every innovator in short, is continually threatened by this kind of coalition.

This last indication of what may be called the political bearing of the story not only brings out every actor in his true aspect, and gives significance to the most trifling details of the drama: it turns a searching light upon a Scene where all social interests form the stage-mechanism.

X

A HAPPY WOMAN'S PRESENTIMENTS

As the General stepped into his carriage and drove away to the prefecture, the Countess reached the Avonne gate, where Michaud and Olympe had taken up their abode some eighteen months ago.

Any one who remembered the hunting-lodge in its previous condition, described above, might have thought that the place had been rebuilt. The bricks that had dropped out or suffered from the weather had been replaced and the walls had been pointed; the white

balusters stood out against a bluish background of clean slates, and the whole house looked cheerful once more. The labyrinth of pig-sties had been cleared away, new gravel had been laid down, and the paths were rolled by the man who had charge of the alleys in the park. The window-facings, entablatures, and cornices, indeed all the carved stonework, had been restored, and the monument of the past shone in all its ancient glory.

The poultry-yard, stable, and cow-sheds had been removed to the precincts by the pheasant-house hidden away behind the wall; all the unsightly details had disappeared, but the sounds, the low cooing, and the flapping of wings mingled with the ceaseless murmur of the forest trees—a most delicate accompaniment to the endless song of Nature. There was something of the wildness of lonely forests about the spot, something too of the trim grace of an English park. And the hunting-lodge looked indescribably stately, fair, and pleasant a dwelling, now that its surroundings were in keeping with the exterior, just as a happy young housewife's care had entirely transformed the lodge within since the days of Courtecuisse's brutish slovenliness.

It was in the height of summer. The scent of flowers in the garden beds blended with the wild scent of the woods and of mown grass from the meadows in the park.

The Countess and her two guests, coming along a winding footpath that led to the hunting-lodge, saw Olympe Michaud sitting in the doorway at work upon baby clothes. The woman's figure, and her work as she sat there sewing, gave the touch of human interest, the final touch which the landscape lacked; a kind of interest which appeals to us in real life so strongly that there are painters who have tried, and tried mistakenly, to introduce it into landscape pictures, forgetting that if they really render the spirit of the landscape upon their canvas its grandeur reduces the human figure into insignificance.

The scene, as we actually see it, is always circumscribed; the spectator's power of vision can only include sufficient of the background to place the figure in its proper setting. Poussin, the Raphael of France, when he painted his *Arcadian Shepherds* subordinated the landscape to the figures; his insight told him how pitiable and poor man becomes in a canvas where Nature takes the chief place.

Here was August in all its glory among fields ready for the harvest, a picture to arouse simple and strong emotion. It was like a realisation of the dream of many a man who has come to long for rest after a storm-tossed existence and a life of change made up of good and evil fortune.

Let us give the history of this household in a few words. When Montcornet had first talked of the head-forester's place at the Aigues, Justin Michaud had not responded very warmly to the gallant cavalry-officer's advances. He was thinking at the time of going into the army again, but in the thick of the conference which brought him frequently to the Hôtel Montcornet, Michaud set eyes on Madame's own woman, and his ideas underwent a change.

The girl came of honest farmers in Alençon, and was something of an heiress, for she had expectations—twenty or thirty thousand francs would be hers sooner or later; but her father and mother, finding themselves in difficulties (a not uncommon case with tillers of the soil who have married young, and whose parents are still living), and consequently unable to give their daughter any education, had entrusted her to the young Countess, who placed her about her person. Mlle. Olympe Charel was not allowed to take her meals at the servants' table. The Countess had her instructed in dressmaking and plain needlework, and was rewarded by the whole-hearted fidelity of which a Parisian stands in need.

Olympe Charel was a pretty, rather plump Normande, with a shade of gold in her fair hair, and bright eyes that

lighted up her face, but a delicate, haughtily curved nose was perhaps one of her most striking characteristics, and a certain maidenliness, in spite of the Spanish curves of her figure. She had all the air of distinction which a young girl, of extraction somewhat above the labouring class, can acquire from contact with a mistress who admits her to a certain degree of intimacy. She was well-mannered and becomingly dressed, expressed herself well, and carried herself with ease. Michaud soon fell in love, and the more readily when he learned that his fair one would have a pretty fortune some day.

It was the Countess who made difficulties. She was unwilling to lose a maid so useful to her; but when Montcornet unfolded his plans for the Aigues, nothing was wanting but the parents' consent for the marriage to take place, and that consent was promptly given.

Michaud, like his master, regarded his wife as a superior being, to be obeyed without reservation. He saw before him all the happiness for which a soldier longs when he leaves the army—a quiet life, plenty of out-door occupation, and just sufficient bodily weariness to make rest delightful. Michaud's courage was established beyond cavil, yet he had never received any serious wound, and had had no experience of the physical suffering which sours many a veteran's temper. Like all really strong natures he was equable, and his wife gave him unbounded love. Their life at the lodge had been one long honeymoon, with no discordant note in their surroundings to break in upon their happiness. Rare fortune! Not always do the circumstances of our outward life harmonise with the life of the inner self.

The scene was so picturesque that the Countess stopped Blondet and the Abbé Brossette. As they stood, they could see the charming Mme. Michaud without being seen by her.

'I always come this way when I walk in the park,' the Countess said in a whisper; 'I like to look at the

hunting-lodge and its pair of turtle-doves; it is like some favourite beautiful view for me.' She leant on Émile Blondet's arm, that he might feel the meaning underlying her words, that where speech fell short touch might convey a subtle significance which women will divine.

'I wish I were a gate-keeper at the Aigues!' exclaimed Blondet, with a smile. . . . . 'Why, what is it?' he added, as a shade of sadness crossed the lady's face at those words.

'Nothing.'

Whenever womankind have something weighing on their minds, they will tell you hypocritically that it is nothing.

'But possibly the thought that preys upon us would seem very trifling to you, though to us it is terrible. I, for my own part, envy Olympe her lot——'

'Wishes are heard in heaven!' said the Abbé Brossette, with a smile that relieved the solemnity of his words.

Something in Olympe's attitude and expression told Mme. de Montcornet of anxiety and fears, and she too grew anxious. A woman can read another woman's thoughts from the way she draws her needle in and out, and, indeed, the head-forester's wife, in her pretty pink dress, her hair coiled daintily about her head, seemed to be turning over sad thoughts in her mind, thoughts but little in keeping with her dress, her work, and the sunny day. Now and again she looked up and fixed unseeing eyes on the gravel paths or the green thickets, and the anxious expression on her fair forehead was the more artlessly displayed because she thought herself unobserved.

'And I was envying her! What can darken her thoughts?' the Countess said, looking at the curé.

'Can you explain, Madame,' said the Abbé, speaking softly, 'how it is that our most perfect bliss is always troubled by dim forebodings?'

'Curé,' said Blondet smiling, 'you permit yourself

Delphic answers.—"Nothing is stolen, everything is paid for," so Napoleon said.'

'Such a saying in the Emperor's mouth becomes a generalisation wide as humanity,' said the Abbé.

'Well, Olympe, what is the matter, child?' asked the Countess, stepping in front of the others towards her ex-waiting-maid. 'You look dreamy and thoughtful. Is it possible that there has been a tiff at home?'

Mme. Michaud rose to her feet. Her face wore a different expression already.

'I should dearly like to know what has brought the shadow over that brow, my child,' said Émile Blondet paternally, 'when we are almost as nicely housed here as the Comte d'Artois at the Tuileries. This is like a nightingale's nest in a thicket. And have we not the bravest man of the Young Guard for a husband, a fine fellow, who loves us to distraction? If I had known the advantages Montcornet offers you here, I would have left off writing padding for newspapers, and turned head-keeper myself!'

'Oh, this is not the place for any one with your genius, sir!' said Olympe, smiling back at him, as if he and she were old acquaintances.

'Why, my dear little woman, what is the matter?' asked the Countess.

'Well, then, my lady, I am afraid——'

'*Afraid!* of what?' the Countess asked quickly. The words put her in mind at once of Mouche and Fourchon.

'Afraid of the wolves?' suggested Émile, making a warning sign which Olympe failed to understand.

'No, sir, it is the peasants. In Perche, where I was born, there certainly were a few bad characters. But I could not believe that there would be such bad people, and so many of them in a place, as there are here. I do not pretend to meddle in Michaud's business, but he trusts the peasants so little that he goes armed in broad daylight if he is going through the forest. He tells his

men to be always on the look-out. Now and again there are figures prowling about here; they mean no good. The other day I was going along by the wall to the spring at the head of the little stream with the sandy bed, which flows through the wood and out into the park through the grating five hundred paces away. They call it the Silver Spring, because Bouret (so they say) strewed silver spangles in it. Do you know it, my lady? Very well, then, there were two women there washing clothes, just where the stream crosses the foot-path to Conches. I heard them talking; they did not know that I was near. You can see our house from the spot. The two old creatures were looking at it and one said to the other, "What a lot of expense they are going to for him that has taken old Courtecuisse's place!" Then the other one said, "Wouldn't you have to pay a man well for plaguing poor folk, as he does?"—"He will not plague them long," answered the first one; "this sort of thing must be put a stop to. After all, we have a *right* to cut wood. Madame des Aigues, that's gone, allowed us to take faggots. We have done it these thirty years; so it is an established right."—"We shall see how things go this winter," the second one went on. "My man has sworn, I know, by all that's sacred, that we shall get our firewood, and that all the gendarmerie on earth shall not hinder us, and that he will do it himself, and so much the worse for them."—'Lord sakes! we must not die of cold, and we must certainly bake our bread'; said the first woman. 'They don't want for nothing, they don't! That blackguard Michaud's little wife will be well taken care of!"—In fact, my lady, they said shocking things about me, and you, and M. le Comte. Then at last they said that first the farm buildings would be fired, and then the château——'

'Pooh!' said Émile, 'old wives' gossip. They used to rob the General; now they will not rob him any longer,

and they are furious: that is all. Just bear in mind that the Government is always the strongest everywhere, even in Burgundy; and they would soon have a regiment of horse down here if there was any occasion for it.'

The curé behind the Countess was making signals to Olympe to cut short the tale of fears, due surely to the second sight of strong love. When a soul finds its all in all in another soul, it scans the whole horizon about that central figure to discern the elements of the future. Love brings a woman the presentiments which at a later day become the second sight of motherhood. Hence the melancholy and unaccountable moods of sadness which bewilder men. The great cares and constant stir of life prevent this concentration in a man, but for a woman all strong love becomes an active contemplation more or less lucid, more or less profound, according to individual character.

'Come, child, show M. Émile over your house,' said the Countess. These new thoughts had put La Péchina out of her mind, and she had quite forgotten the purpose of her visit.

The inside of the house had been restored and brought into harmony with the imposing exterior. An architect and workmen had come from Paris (a slight warmly resented by Ville-aux-Fayes), and the original partition-walls were restored, so that now there were, as at first, four rooms on the ground floor. An old-fashioned balustraded wooden staircase rose at the further end of the lobby, behind it lay the kitchen, and on either side of it the two oak-panelled parlours with coats of arms painted on the ceilings. The furniture had been chosen to match these old-fashioned decorations by the artist who had restored the rooms at the Aigues.

In those days it was not the fashion to set an exaggerated value on the wreckage of bygone centuries. The lumber rooms of furniture-shops at Ville-aux-Fayes were

full of old high-backed tapestry-covered chairs in carved walnut wood, console tables, old timepieces, tables, sconces, and woven hangings, solid furniture worth half as much again as the flimsy stuff turned out by the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Two or three cartloads of this old lumber, carefully chosen by the aforesaid architect, and some disused furniture from the château, had transformed the parlour at the Avonne gate into something like an artist's creation. The dining-room had been painted the colour of the natural wood, a paper of the kind known as Highland plaid covered the walls. Mme. Michaud had hung white green-fringed dimity curtains in the windows, the mahogany chairs were covered with green stuff, and two huge mahogany sideboards and a mahogany dining-table completed the furniture. Prints of soldiers adorned the walls. The keeper's guns were stacked on either side of the porcelain stove. Rumour exaggerated these inexpensive glories until they became the last word of oriental luxury. Strange it was! These things aroused Gaubertin's covetousness, and when, in his own mind, he pulled the Aigues to pieces, he reserved that palatial lodge for himself.

The three principal bedrooms occupied the first floor. Here you beheld those muslin curtains associated in a Parisian's mind with the peculiar notions and mental attitude of those who conform to bourgeois standards. Here, if Mme. Michaud had been left to herself, she would have had satin wall-papers. Her own room contained a four-post bedstead, with a curving head and coronal from which the embroidered muslin curtains hung. The rest of the furniture was of the ordinary mahogany, Utrecht-velvet-covered kind to be seen everywhere; but the chimney-piece displayed an alabaster clock flanked by two gauze-shrouded candlesticks and vases of artificial flowers beneath glass shades—the quartermaster's marriage-gifts to his bride. The rooms in the roof where La Péchina, the cook, and the man

belonging to the establishment were lodged, had also shared in the benefits of the restoration.

'Olympe, child, there is something else,' said the Countess (she had gone into Mme. Michaud's room, leaving Émile and the curé, who went downstairs together, when they heard the bedroom door close).

The Abbé Brossette had managed to get a word with Mme. Michaud. So now, to avoid mentioning the fears which were far more serious than her words had led them to suppose, she made a mysterious communication which reminded Mme. de Montcornet of the purpose of her visit.

'I love Michaud, my lady, as you know. Very well then, would you be pleased to have a rival always with you in the house?'

'A rival!'

'Yes, my lady. That little gypsy you gave to me to look after has fallen in love with Michaud. She does not know it herself, poor child! . . . For a long while her behaviour was a mystery to me, but the mystery was cleared up a few days ago.'

'A girl of thirteen——!'

'Yes, my lady. And you will admit that a woman three months advanced in pregnancy, who means to nurse her child herself, may have fears. I could not tell you that before those gentlemen, so I said things that meant nothing,' the generous woman added adroitly.

Olympe Michaud's anxiety on Geneviève Niseron's account was exceedingly small, but she went in mortal terror for her husband, and the peasants who had roused her fears took a malicious delight in keeping them alive.

'And what opened your eyes?'

'Nothing and everything!' Olympe answered, looking full at the Countess. 'Poor little thing, she is as slow as a tortoise over anything that I tell her to do, and as quick as a lizard if Justin asks her for the least trifle. She quivers like a leaf at the sound of my

husband's voice; her face, when she looks at him, is like the face of a saint rising up to heaven; but she does not know what love is; she does not suspect that she is in love.'

'Poor child!' said the Countess, unconscious that her smile and tone revealed her thoughts. Mme. Michaud smiled an answer to her young mistress's smile.

'Geneviève is glum, for instance, when Justin is out of the house; if I ask her what she is thinking about, she says that she is afraid of M. Rigou—all rubbish! She thinks that every one is after her—and she as black as the chimney flue! When Justin is making his round of a night in the woods, the child is every bit as nervous as I am. If I open the window when I hear my husband's horse coming I can see a light in her room, which shows that La Pechina (as they call her) is sitting up, waiting for him to come in. Like me, she does not go to bed till he comes home.'

'Thirteen years old!' said the Countess; 'unfortunate girl——'

'Unfortunate?' echoed Olympe. 'Oh! no. Her child's passion will save her.'

'From what?'

'From the fate of almost every girl of her age hereabouts. She is not so plain-looking now since I have polished her up, and there is something uncommon about her, something wild, that men find taking.—She has altered so much that you would not know her, my lady. There is Nicolas, the son of that abominable man at the *Grand-I Vert*, and one of the worst rogues in the place; he bears the child a grudge and hunts her like game. You could scarcely believe that a rich man like M. Rigou, who changes his servant every three years, could persecute an ugly little girl of twelve, but it really seems as if Nicolas Tonsard was after La Péchina; Justin told me as much. It would be a shocking thing, for the people here live just like beasts, but Justin and the two servants and I

watch over the child; so be easy, my lady; she never goes out except in broad daylight, and then she only goes from here to the Conches gate. If by chance she should fall into a trap, her feeling for Justin would give her strength and will to resist, as a woman who cares about another can resist a man she detests.'

'I came here on her account,' said the lady; 'I had no idea how much the visit was needed for your sake, for she will not always be thirteen. The child will grow handsomer.'

'Oh! I am quite sure of Justin, my lady,' Olympe said, smiling. 'What a man! what a heart!—If you only knew how deep his gratitude is to the General, to whom (he says) he owes his happiness! He is only too devoted; he would risk his life as if he were in the army still; he forgets that now he may be a father.'

'Well,' said the Countess, with a glance that brought the colour into Olympe's face, 'I was sorry to lose you; but now that I see your happiness I have no regrets left. How sublime and noble married love is!' she added, thinking aloud the thought which she had not dared to utter in the Abbé's presence. Virginie de Troisville stood lost in musings, and Olympe Michaud respected her mistress's mood.

'Let us see,' the Countess said, speaking like one who awakes from a dream. 'Is this little one honest?'

'As honest as I am myself, my lady.'

'Discreet?'

'As a tomb.'

'Has she a grateful nature?'

'Oh, my lady, she has fits of humility, signs of an angelic nature, she comes and kisses my hands and says things that would amaze you.—"Is it possible to die of love?" she asked me the day before yesterday.—"What makes you ask me that?" said I.—"I wanted to know if it was a disease."'

'Did she say that?' exclaimed the Countess.

'If I could remember all that she says, I could tell you much stranger things than that,' said Olympe. 'It looks as if she knows more about it than I do.'

'Do you think, my dear, that she might take your place? for I cannot do without an Olympe,' said the Countess, with something like sadness in her smile.

'Not yet, my lady, she is too young; in two years' time she might. Then, if she must go away, I will let you know. She must be trained first; she knows nothing of the world. Geneviève's grandfather, old Niseron, is one of those men who would have his throat cut sooner than tell a lie; he would die of hunger sooner than touch anything entrusted to him. He holds to his opinions, and his grand-daughter has been brought up in the same way of thinking. La Péchina would think herself your equal, for the good man has made a Republican of her, as he puts it; just as old Fourchon has made a vagabond of Mouche. I myself laugh at these flights, but you might be annoyed by them. She would worship you for your kindness, but she would not look up to you as above her in station. How can it be helped! She is as wild as a swallow. The mother, too, counts for something in all this.'

'Then who was the mother?'

'Do you not know the story, my lady? Oh, well, old Niseron, the sacristan at Blangy, had a son, a fine strapping young fellow he was, they say, and he was drawn by the great requisition. Young Niseron was still only a gunner in 1809, in a regiment stationed in the heart of Illyria and Dalmatia. Then there came orders to march at once through Hungary to cut off the retreat of the Austrians if the Emperor should win the battle of Wagram. Michaud was in Dalmatia, and he told me all about it. While they were at Zahara, young Niseron, being a very handsome young fellow, won the heart of a Montenegrin girl from the hills, who looked not unkindly on the French garrison. After they left the

place the girl found it impossible to stay in it, she had lowered herself so much in her people's eyes; so Zéna Kropoli—"the Frenchwoman," as they scornfully called her—followed the regiment. After the peace she came to France. Auguste Niseron asked for leave to marry the Montenegrin a little while before Geneviève was born, but the poor thing died at Vincennes shortly after the birth of the child in January 1810. The papers which you must have, if a marriage is to be valid, came a few days too late, so Auguste Niseron wrote to ask his father to come for the child, to bring a wet-nurse with him, and to take charge of it; and it was very well he did so, for he was killed soon after by a shell at Montereau. The child was baptised Geneviève at Soulanges. Mlle. Laguerre was much touched by the case and took an interest in the child; it seems as if it were decreed that Geneviève should be adopted by the gentry at the Aigues. Time was when Niseron had all the baby-clothes from the château, and he was helped with money too.'

The Countess and Olympe, standing by the window, saw Michaud come up to Blondet and the Abbé Brossette, who were chatting as they walked up and down in the sanded semi-circular space which corresponded to the crescent outside the park palings.

'Where can she be?' asked the lady; 'you have made me extremely curious to see her.'

'She has gone to take the milk to Mlle. Gaillard at the Conches gate. She cannot be far away, for she has been gone for more than an hour.'

'Oh, well, I will go to meet her with these gentlemen,' said Mme. de Montcornet, and she went downstairs. She was just opening her sunshade when Michaud came up to tell her that her husband would probably be away for two days.

'M. Michaud,' the Countess began quickly, 'tell me the plain truth. Something serious is afoot. Your wife

is nervous; and really, if the place is full of such people as old Fourchon, no one could live in it——'

'If it were like that, we should not be on our legs, my lady,' said Michaud laughing, 'for it would be very easy to get rid of us keepers. The peasants call out, that is all. But as for proceeding from squalling to acting, from petty theft to crime, they set too much store on their own lives and the open air for that. Olympe must have been repeating some gossip that frightened her—but a dream would frighten her just now,' he added, taking his wife's arm and laying it on his own in a way that bade her say no more of her fears.

'Cornevin! Juliette!' called Mme. Michaud. The old servant's face soon appeared at the window. 'I am going out for a minute or two. Look after the house.'

Two huge dogs began to bark; evidently the lodge by the Avonne gate was not ill garrisoned. The barking of the dogs brought out Cornevin from behind the wall—Cornevin, a Percheron and Olympe's foster-father, with a face such as Perche alone can produce. Cornevin must surely have been a Chouan in '94 and '99.

The whole party went with the Countess along that one of the six gravelled ways which went by the side of the Silver Spring towards the Conches gate. Mme. de Montcornet and Blondet walked ahead of the others. The curé, the head-forester, and Olympe talked with lowered voices over this revelation which had been made to the lady.

'Perhaps it is all for the best,' concluded the curé, 'for if Mme. de Montcornet chooses we may work a change in these people by kindness and gentleness.'

They had come about a couple of hundred yards from the lodge by this time, and had passed the point where the stream flowed in, when the Countess saw the broken shards of a red earthen pitcher on the path; milk had been spilt.

'What has happened to the child?' she asked, calling to Michaud and his wife, who had turned back.

'The same little mishap that befell the milkmaid in the fable,' said Blondet.

'No,' said the Abbé, looking about him, 'some one sprang out upon the poor child and chased her.'

'Yes. Those are certainly La Péchina's footprints,' said Michaud. The footmarks turned so sharply that evidently the whole thing had happened suddenly. The little girl, in her terror, must have made a dash for the lodge and tried to reach home.

The whole party followed the track pointed out by head-forester, and saw that the footmarks came to an abrupt end in the middle of the path, about a hundred paces from the broken pitcher.

'There she turned off towards the Avonne,' said Michaud. 'Perhaps some one cut off her retreat.'

'Why, she has been away for more than an hour!' cried Mme. Michaud.

The same dismay was visible in all faces. The curé hurried towards the lodge, looking along the path; and Michaud, with the same idea in his mind, went in the other direction towards Conches.

'Good heavens! she had a fall here,' said Michaud, returning from the point where the footprints ceased in the direction of the Silver Spring to the other point, where they came to an end in the middle of the path. 'Look here!' He pointed to a spot where every one saw at once the marks of a headlong fall.

'Those footprints that point toward the woods are marks of stocking-soles,' said the curé.

'Of a woman's foot,' said the Countess.

'But down there, where the pitcher was broken, there are a man's footprints,' added Michaud.

'There is only one set of footmarks that I can see,' said the curé, who had returned from following the woman's track as far as the wood.

'Some one had caught her up and carried her off into the wood!' cried Michaud.

'If the footmarks are made by a woman the thing is inexplicable,' added Blondet.

'That abominable Nicolas must have been at his games,' said Michaud; 'he has been lying in wait for La Péchina for several days past. I waited for two hours this morning under the Avonne bridge to catch my gentleman; perhaps he has got some woman to help him.'

'It is shocking!' cried the Countess.

'They look upon it as a joke,' said the curé, half sadly, half bitterly.

'Oh, La Péchina would not let them hold her!' said Michaud, 'she is just the one to swim the Avonne. I will go and look along the river.—Olympe, dear, you must go home.—And perhaps you, gentlemen, will go with my lady along the way to Conches.'

'O what a neighbourhood!' said the Countess.

'There are blackguards everywhere,' Blondet suggested.

'M. le Curé, is it true that my interference saved this child from old Rigou's clutches?' asked Mme. de Montcornet.

'Any girl under the age of fifteen whom you take to the château will be rescued from that monster,' said the Abbé Brossette. 'When the apostate tried to get hold of the child, he meant to slake his thirst for vengeance as well as his licentious desires. When I took old Niseron as sacristan, I made him understand what Rigou meant; Rigou used to talk of making reparation for the injuries done him by his uncle, M. Niseron, my predecessor. The ex-mayor bore me a grudge for that, and it swelled his hate. Old Niseron gave Rigou solemn warning that if any harm came to Geneviève, he would kill him, and that he held Rigou responsible for any attempt upon the child. I should not be very far wrong if I saw some

infernal plot of his in Nicolas Tonsard's behaviour. He thinks he can do as he likes here.'

'But is he not afraid of the law?' asked Blondet.

'In the first place, Rigou is the public-prosecutor's father-in-law,' the curé began. There was a pause; then he went on.—'You would not imagine how utterly indifferent the divisional police and the criminal department are here with regard to such things. So long as the peasants refrain from arson and murder, so long as they pay the taxes and do not poison people, they may do as they please among themselves, and as they have not a vestige of religious principle, the state of things is shocking. On the other side of the valley there are helpless old men, past work, who are afraid to stay in their homes lest they should be starved to death; they are out in the fields as long as their legs will carry them; they know that if they once take to their beds they will die—of sheer hunger. M. Sarcus, the justice of the peace, says that if all criminals were brought to justice, the government would be bankrupt through expenses of prosecution.'

'Well, there is a magistrate who sees things as they are!' exclaimed Blondet.

'Ah, his lordship the bishop knew quite well how things were in this valley, and more especially in this commune,' the curé continued. 'Religion is the only remedy for such evils; legislation seems to me to be powerless, restricted as it is——'

The curé was interrupted by shrieks from the wood. Émile Blondet and the Abbé, followed by the Countess, plunged boldly in the direction from which the cries came.

XI

THE OARISTYS, THE EIGHTEENTH ECLOGUE OF THEOCRITUS, LITTLE APPRECIATED IN A COURT OF ASSIZE

SOMETHING of the sagacity of the savage, developed in Michaud by his new calling, together with a newly acquired knowledge of the state of feeling and affairs in the commune of Blangy, had just explained, in part, a third Idyl, modelled on the Greek. Impecunious swains like Nicolas Tonsard and well-to-do seniors of the stamp of old Rigou make liberal translations of such Idyls (in school phrase) for the use of remote country districts.

Nicolas, Tonsard's second son, had drawn an unlucky number in the last conscription. Two years previously, thanks to the united efforts of Soudry, Gaubertin, and Money-Sarcus, Nicolas's older brother had been pronounced unfit for military service, on account of some imaginary affection of the muscles of the right arm. Jean-Louis's subsequent dexterity in handling the heaviest implements of husbandry had been much remarked, and had caused some talk in the district.

So Soudry, Rigou, and Gaubertin, who watched over the family, warned Tonsard that Nicolas, a big tall fellow, must not attempt to evade the law of conscription. At the same time, however, both the worthy mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes and Rigou had so lively a sense of the necessity of keeping on good terms with a bold man who might be a useful engine if properly directed against the Aigues, that Rigou held out some hope to the Tonsards, father and son.

Catherine, that devoted sister, paid the unfrocked monk an occasional visit, and was advised to apply to the General and the Countess.

'He maybe would not be sorry to do it to make things sweet, and anyway it would be so much got out of the enemy,' said the public-prosecutor's terrible father-in-law to Catherine, demanding counsel. 'If the Upholsterer refuses—well, we shall see.'

In Rigou's forecasts the General's refusal was one more wrong to swell the account of injuries done to the peasants by the great landowner, as well as a fresh cause for gratitude to bind Tonsard to the coalition if the ex-mayor's crafty brain should hit upon some way of liberating Nicolas.

Nicolas, bound to present himself for medical examination in a few days' time, founded little hope on the General's influence, for the Aigues had several grievances against the Tonsards. Nicolas's passion, or, more properly speaking, his fancy or whim for La Péchina was so heated by the notion of an approaching departure which left him no time to carry out his projects concerning her that he determined to try violence.

The contempt that the child showed her persecutor, together with her energetic resistance, had kindled in the Lovelace of the *Grand-I-Vert* a fury of hate that equalled his frenzy of desire. For three days he had lain in wait for La Péchina, and she, poor child, knew of this. Between the girl and Nicolas there was the same mutual recognition that there is between the sportsman and the game. La Péchina could not go beyond the great iron gates, but Nicolas would show his face in one of the paths under the park walls, or he was waiting about on the bridge over the Avonne. She could soon have put herself beyond reach of this hateful persecution by speaking to her grandfather, but a strange fear, perhaps a natural instinct, leads even the simplest-natured girls to shrink from confiding in their natural protectors in matters of this kind.

Geneviève, moreover, had heard old Niseron solemnly swear that he would kill any man whatsoever who should

dare (his own expression) 'to lay a finger on her.' (The old man imagined that the white aureole of his own seventy blameless years of life would be a protection to his little grand-daughter.) The prospect of a tragedy positively appalling to a girl's lively imagination is quite sufficient to seal her lips; there is no need to explore the recesses of her heart for a multiplication of curious reasons for her silence.

The cow at the Conches gate had calved, and Mme. Michaud was daily sending milk to Gaillard's daughter. Before La Péchina set out on this errand, she always made a survey like a cat about to venture forth from the house. She saw no sign of Nicolas; she 'listened to the silence,' as the poet says, and hearing nothing, thought that the scoundrel must have gone to his work. The peasants had begun to cut their rye; they always finish their own little patches early, so as to be ready to earn the extra wages paid to harvesters. But Nicolas was not the man to make much ado over the loss of a couple of days' wages, and he was the less likely to grudge them just now because he was going away after the Soulanges fair, and to 'go for a soldier' means the beginning of a new life for the peasant.

But when La Péchina, with her pitcher on her head, had come half-way, Nicolas scrambled like a wild cat down the elm-tree, where he lay in hiding among the leaves, and dropped like a thunderbolt at her feet. La Péchina flung away her pitcher, and trusted to her speed to reach the lodge. But Catherine, lying in ambush a hundred paces away, sprang out of the wood and ran up against the little girl with such force that La Péchina fell over. Catherine picked her up still dazed with the violent shock, and carried her off into an open space among the trees where the Silver Spring bubbled up in the grass.

Catherine was tall and strong. In all respects she recalled the models selected by painters and sculptors for figures of Liberty and the ideal Republic. Her

beauty, which found favour in the eyes of the youth of the valley, was of the same full-bosomed type, she had the same strong pliant figure, the same muscular lower limbs, the plump arms, the eyes that gleamed with a spark of fire, the proud expression, the hair grasped and twisted in thick handfuls, the masculine forehead, the red mouth, the lips that curled back with a smile that had something almost ferocious in it—such a smile as Delacroix and David (of Angers) caught and rendered to admiration. A glowing brunette, the image of the people, the flames of insurrection seemed to leap forth from her clear tawny eyes; there was a soldierly insolence in their piercing gaze. Catherine had inherited from her father a temper so violent that every other member of the family at the tavern feared her, Tonsard excepted.

'Well, how do you feel, old girl?' she asked of La Péchina. Catherine, for her own ends, had set her victim down on a little knoll beside the spring, and had brought her to her senses by splashing cold water in her face.

'Where am I?' asked the little girl, opening her beautiful dark eyes. It was as if a ray of sunlight shone from them.

'Ah! if it hadn't been for me, you would be dead by now,' returned Catherine.

'Thank you,' said the child, still quite dizzy with her fall. 'What can have happened to me?'

'You stumbled over a tree root, and down you went as if a bullet had struck you. Oh! didn't you run too! You bolted away like a mad thing!'

'It was your brother's fault, he caused the accident,' said La Péchina, recollecting the sight of Nicolas.

'My brother? I did not see him,' said Catherine. 'Poor Nicolas, what may he have done that you are as frightened of him as if he were a bogey? Isn't he better-looking than your M. Michaud?'

'Oh!' said La Péchina disdainfully.

'Come, child, you are laying up trouble for yourself by being so fond of those who persecute us! Why are you not on our side?'

'Why do you never set foot in a church? And why do you steal night and day?' the younger girl inquired.

'So you believe what the masters tell you, do you?' retorted Catherine scornfully, and without suspicion of La Péchina's attachment. 'The bourgeois are fond of us, as they are fond of their food; they must have a plateful of something new every day. Where may you have seen the bourgeois that would marry one of us peasant girls? Just you see whether Money-Sarcus will allow his son to marry pretty Gatienne Giboulard of Auxerre, though her father is a rich man and a cabinet-maker! You have never been to the *Tivoli* at Soulanges, Socquard's place. You ought to come. You would see the bourgeois, there, that you would! Then you would begin to see that they are hardly worth the money that we make out of them when we get hold of them. Just you come to the fair this year.'

'People say that the fair at Soulanges is very fine!' La Péchina cried childishly.

'I will just tell you what it is in two words,' Catherine went on. 'If you are pretty, they make eyes at you. What is the good of being as pretty as you are if it is not to have the men admire you? Oh! the first time I heard some one say, "What a fine girl!" the blood in my veins turned to fire. That was at Socquard's, when the dancing was in full swing; grandfather was playing the clarinette, and he smiled, and I thought the *Tivoli* as big and as fine as heaven. Why, child, it is all lighted up with Argand lamps and looking-glasses; you might think you were in paradise. And all the gentlemen from Soulanges and Auxerre and Ville-aux-Fayes are there. Ever since that night I have loved the place where those words sounded in my ears like military music. You

would bargain away your eternity to hear that said of you, child, by the man you have a liking for!'

'Why, yes; perhaps,' said La Péchina dreamily.

'Just come and hear that benediction from a man's lips; you are sure to have it!' cried Catherine. 'Lord, a girl as smart as you are stands a good chance of making a fine match! There is M. Lupin's son, Amaury, he has coats with gold buttons all down them; he would be very likely to ask for you in marriage! And that is not all, by any means! If you but knew what a cure for care they keep there! Look here—Socquard's spiced wine would make you forget the biggest troubles. Only imagine it, it puts fancies into your head, you feel lighter!—You have never drunk spiced wine, have you?—Oh, well then, you do not know what life is!'

The grown-up person's privilege of moistening the throat now and again with a glass of spiced wine excites the curiosity of a child under twelve to such a pitch that Geneviève once had put to her lips a glass that the doctor ordered for her grandfather when the old man was ill. That experiment, and a sort of magical memory which it had left in the poor child's mind, may explain the attentive hearing which she gave to Catherine. That wicked creature had counted upon making an impression, to carry out in full a plan which so far had met with success. Doubtless she meant that her victim, half-stunned by her fall, should reach a stage of mental intoxication particularly dangerous for a country girl whose seldom-stirred imagination is so much the more ardent when once heated. The spiced wine, kept in reserve, was to complete the task of turning the victim's head.

'Then what is there in it?' asked La Péchina.

'All sorts of things!' said Catherine, glancing sideways to see whether her brother was coming. 'Thing-um-bobs from the Indies, to begin with, cinnamon and herbs that change you by enchantment. In fact, you

feel as if you have everything you want. It makes you happy! You do not care a straw for anything.'

'I should be afraid to drink spiced wine while I was dancing!' put in La Péchina.

'Afraid of what?' asked Catherine. 'There is not the least thing to be afraid of. Just remember what a lot of people there are about. And all the bourgeois looking on at us! Ah! one day of that kind will help you to bear up against lots of troubles. See it and die, one would be content.'

'If only M. and Mme. Michaud would come too——' began La Péchina, her eyes on fire.

'Why, there is your grandfather Niseron, you haven't given him up, have you? Poor dear man, he would feel flattered to see you queening it! Do you really like those *arminacs*, Michaud and the rest of them, better than your grandfather and us Burgundians? It is not nice to forsake your own kith and kin. And then, besides, what could the Michauds say if your grandfather were to take you to the fair at Soulanges?—Oh! if you only knew what it is to reign over a man, to have him wild about you, to be able to tell him to "Go there!" as I tell Godain, and he goes, or "Do this!" and he does it! And rigged out as you are, child, you see, you would completely turn some gentleman's head; M. Lupin's son, for instance.—To think that M. Amaury is sweet upon Marie, my sister, because she has fair hair; and he is afraid of me, as you may say.—But as for you, now that those people at the lodge have smartened you up, you look like an empress.'

While Catherine cleverly turned the girl's thoughts away from Nicolas, the better to dispel suspicion in that simple mind, she cunningly distilled the nectar of flattery. Unwittingly she had found the weak spot in her victim's heart. La Péchina, though neither more nor less than a poor peasant girl, was an appalling instance of precocious development, like many a nature destined to end even as

they blossom, prematurely. She was a strange freak, produced by crossing the Montenegrin and Burgundian strains, begotten and born amid the turmoil of war, and all these circumstances had doubtless gone to the moulding of her. Thin, slender, and brown as a tobacco-leaf, she possessed incredible physical strength; but her low height was deceptive to the eyes of peasants who know nothing of the mysteries of the nervous system. Nerves do not come within the ken of rural pathology.

Geneviève at thirteen was scarce as tall as other girls of her age, but she had come to her full height. Did she owe to her extraction, or to the sun of Burgundy, the dusky but glowing topaz-tint of her face? the glow of the blood through the dusky transparent tissues, a colour that adds years to a girl's apparent age? Medical science would perhaps decline to decide. The premature age of La Péchina's features was atoned for by the brightness—the splendid blaze of light—in the eyes that shone like two stars. Perhaps it is because such eyes are so full of sunlight that they are always shaded by long thick lashes; hers were almost exaggerated in length.

Thick tresses of blue-black hair, fine and long and abundant, rose above a forehead carved like the brows of an antique Juno, but the splendid crown of hair, the great dark eyes, the goddess's brow eclipsed the lower part of the face. The upper part of the nose was regular in shape and slightly aquiline, but below it terminated in blunted nostrils, with something equine about them. In moments of vehement excitement they turn up, a trick of facial expression that gave her a look of fierce frenzy. Like the nose, the rest of the face seemed to have been left unfinished; it was as if clay had been wanting to the hand of the Great Sculptor. The space beneath the mouth was so narrow that any one who should take La Péchina by the chin must have touched her lips; but her teeth diverted attention from this defect. You could almost have credited each one of those little, glistening,

enamelled, shapely-cut, translucent bones with intelligent life, and a mouth somewhat too wide made it easy to see them. This last defect was further emphasised by the sinuous curving lines of lips, that bore a resemblance to the fantastic branchings of coral.

The shell-like convolutions of her ears were so translucent that they turned to a rose-red in the light. Sunburned though she was, the skin revealed the marvellous fineness of the tissues beneath. If love lies in the sense of touch, as Buffon avers, such a silken skin must have been as subtle and as penetrating as the scent of daturas. Her chest, indeed her whole body, was appallingly thin, but the little hands and feet were bewitchingly small, a sign of unusual nervous power and of an organisation capable of endurance.

A fierce pride blended these diabolical imperfections and divine beauties into harmony, in spite of discords; the undaunted spirit housed in the feeble body looked forth from her eyes. Once having seen the child, it was impossible to forget her. Nature had meant to fashion a woman, but the circumstances of conception had given her a boy's face and figure. At sight of the strange girl, a poet would have given her Yemen for her native land and Arabian efreets and genii for her kin. Nor was La Péchina's outward appearance misleading. She had a spirit that matched her eyes of fire, the quick wit suggested by the lips set with the brilliants of bewitching teeth; she had thoughts that fitted her queenly brow, the equine fury of the nostrils that seemed ready to neigh at any moment. Love, as it springs into being amid burning sands and in the deserts shook the pulses of the heart of twenty years in the thirteen-year-old Montenegrin girl; it was with her as with her snowy mountain ranges, summer had come upon her before the spring flowers had had time to bloom.

By this time observing minds will understand how it was that La Péchina, breathing out passion at every pore,

should stir the sluggish fancies of depraved natures. At table your mouth waters at the sight of certain fruits, pitted, contorted, covered with dark specks; the gourmet knows that under such a rind Nature has hidden her cunningest savours and perfume. Why, when every one else in the valley pitied La Péchina for an ill-grown weakling, should a clod-pate like Nicolas Tonsard have set his choice on a creature worthy of a poet? Why should Rigou, in his old age, desire her with the heat of youth? Which of these two was young or old? Was the young peasant as sated as the old money-lender? How was it that both extremes of life united in one sinister caprice? Is exhausted vigour like the first beginnings of strength? Men's vices are unfathomable depths guarded by sphinxes, and questions to which there are no answers almost always stand at the beginning and end of devious ways.

It may now be imagined how it was that the exclamation *Piccina!* broke from the Countess when she first saw Geneviève by the roadside in the previous year, a child in a maze of wonder at the sight of the carriage and a lady inside it dressed like Mme. de Montcornet. And it was this girl, so nearly one of Nature's failures in the making, who now loved with all the energy of her Montenegrin nature. She loved the tall, handsome, noble-hearted forester, as children of her age can love when they love, that is to say with a frenzy of childish desire, with all the force of their youth, with the devotion which sows the seeds of divine romance in a virgin soil. Catherine's coarse hand had smitten the most responsive strings of a harp strained to breaking. To dance under Michaud's eyes! To go to the saloon at Soulanges! To engrave herself upon the memory of this idolised master! What thoughts were these to drop into that volcanic brain? What was this but to fling live coals upon straw lying out in the August sun?

'No, Catherine,' said La Péchina. 'No, I am an

ugly, puny thing. I shall have to sit in a corner and be an old maid all alone in the world; that is my fate.'

'Men like peaked-looking girls,' Catherine declared. 'Look here at me!' she went on, holding out both arms. 'There is Godain, a regular shrimp, has taken a fancy to me; so has that little fellow Charles that goes about with the Count. But young Lupin is shy of me. I tell you again, it is the little men that fall in love with me and say "What a fine girl!" at Ville-aux-Fayes or Soulanges. Now all the tall, fine-looking men will fall in love with you.'

'Oh, Catherine, *really*? is that true?' cried La Péchina in an ecstasy.

'Why, it is as true as this, that Nicolas, the finest fellow in the neighbourhood, is over head and ears in love with you. He dreams of you, and gets low about you, and all the girls in the place are in love with him. He is a mettled lad!—If you put on a white frock and yellow ribbons, you will be the handsomest girl in the room at Socquard's, at the feast of Our Lady, when all the grand folk of Ville-aux-Fayes are there! Look here, will you come?—Wait a bit, I was cutting grass yonder for our cows. I have a drop of spiced wine in my gourd; Socquard gave it me this morning,' she went on, seeing in La Péchina's eyes the excited look that every woman understands; 'I am a good-natured one, we will go shares at it. You will fancy that some one is in love with you.'

As they talked Nicolas came stealing towards them, picking out patches of thick grass to step upon, creeping noiselessly till he reached the trunk of a huge oak-tree near the place where his sister had deposited La Péchina. Catherine's eyes, always looking about her, lighted at last on Nicolas as she went for the spiced wine.

'There! you take the first pull,' said she.

'It burns!' exclaimed Geneviève, handing back the gourd after a couple of sips.

'There, you silly!' retorted Catherine, as she emptied the rustic flask, 'that is the way! It is as if a ray of sunlight shone in your inside.'

'And here am I that ought to have taken the milk to Mlle. Gaillard!' cried La Péchina. 'Nicolas scared me——'

'So you don't like Nicolas?'

'No, I don't,' answered La Péchina. 'What makes him hunt me about? There are plenty of creatures that would be glad of him.'

'But suppose that he likes you better than any one else in the valley, child——'

'I am sorry for him,' said La Péchina.

'It is plain that you do not know him,' returned the older girl.

The ominous words were hardly uttered before Catherine Tonsard sprang upon La Péchina, caught her by the waist, flung her flat upon the grass and held her down, so that she had no power to extricate herself from her perilous position. At the sight of her loathed persecutor, Geneviève shrieked with all her might, and directed a kick in the stomach at Nicolas which sent him reeling five paces back; then like an acrobat she wriggled round so deftly that she defeated Catherine's calculations and got up to run away. But Catherine, still on the ground, reached out an arm and clutched her by the foot, and La Péchina fell heavily headlong forwards. This ugly fall put a stop to the brave girl's incessant cries. Nicolas, who had recovered himself in spite of the violence of the blow, came up in a towering rage and tried to seize his victim. The child's head was heavy with the wine, but in this strait she caught Nicolas by the throat and held him in an iron grip.

'She is choking me! . . . Catherine! help!' cried Nicolas with difficulty, making his voice audible.

La Péchina shrieked aloud. Catherine tried to stop the sounds by putting a hand over her mouth, but the

child bit her till the blood came. At that very moment Blondet and the Countess and the curé appeared on the outskirts of the wood.

'Here come the gentry from the Aigues,' said Catherine, helping Geneviève to rise.

'Do you want to live?' said Nicolas Tonsard hoarsely.

'And if I do?' said La Péchina.

'Tell them that we were romping and I will forgive you,' said Nicolas with a scowl.

'Are you going to say that, you cat?' insisted Catherine, with a glance more terrific than Nicolas's murderous threat.

'Yes, if you will let me alone,' said La Péchina. 'Anyhow I shall not go out again without my scissors.'

'You hold your tongue or I will chuck you into the Avonne,' said Catherine savagely.

'You are wretches!' cried the curé. 'You deserve to be arrested and sent up for trial for this.'

'Oh, as to that, what do some of you do in your drawing-rooms?' asked Nicolas, staring at the Countess and Blondet, who quailed. 'You play there, don't you? All right, the fields are our playground, and you cannot always be at work; we were playing. You ask my sister and La Péchina.'

'What can you do when it comes to blows if this is the way you play?' exclaimed Blondet.

Nicolas looked at Blondet with a deadly hate in his eyes.

'Speak up!' said Catherine, taking La Péchina by the fore-arm and gripping it till she left a blue bracelet of bruises round it. 'We were having a game, weren't we?——'

'Yes, my lady, we were having a game,' said La Péchina. The child's whole strength was exhausted; she stood limp and drooping as if she were about to faint.

'You hear that, my lady,' said Catherine brazenly,

with a glance that between woman and woman is like a stab.

She took her brother's arm and the pair walked off together. They knew quite well what ideas they had given the three personages behind them. Twice Nicolas looked round; twice he encountered Blondet's eyes. The literary man was scanning the tall, broad-shouldered rascal. Nicolas stood five feet eight inches high; he had crisp black hair, a high colour, his face was good-tempered enough, but there were significant lines about the lips and mouth that suggested the cruelty peculiar to lust and idleness. Catherine swayed her white-and-blue-striped skirts as she went with a sort of vicious coquetry.

'Cain and his wife,' said Blondet, turning to the curé.

'You do not know how well your words have hit the mark,' returned the Abbé Brossette.

'Oh! M. le Curé, what will they do to me?' cried La Péchina, as soon as the brother and sister were out of ear-shot.

The Countess's face was as white as her handkerchief. The whole thing had been a great shock to her, so great that she heard neither La Péchina, nor the curé, nor Blondet.

'This would drive one from an earthly paradise,' she said at last; 'but of all things let us save this little one from their clutches.'

'You were right,' Blondet said in a low voice meant only for the Countess. 'The child is a whole romance —a romance in flesh and blood.'

The Montenegrin girl had reached a point when body and soul seem to smoke with the unquenched fires of wrath which have put the utmost strain on every faculty, physical and mental.

There is an inexpressible and supreme human splendour which only breaks forth under the pressure of some high-wrought mood of struggle or of victory, of love or martyrdom. She had left home that morning in a frock

of a material of narrow brown-and-yellow stripes, with a little frill at the throat that she had risen early to pleat into her dress; and now she stood as yet unconscious of the disorder of her earth-stained garments or her torn frill. Her hair strayed down over her face, she felt for her comb; but with that first dawn of dismay Michaud appeared upon the scene; he also had heard the cries. All La Péchina's energy returned at once at the sight of her god.

'He did not so much as lay a finger on me, M. Michaud!'

That cry and its accompanying glance and gesture, which spoke more eloquently than the words, told Blondet and the curé in one moment more than Mme. Michaud had told the Countess of the strange girl's passion for the head-forester, who was blind to it.

'The wretch!' exclaimed Michaud; and acting on an impulse of impotent wrath which takes the fool and the wise alike at unawares, he shook his fist in the direction of Nicolas, whose tall figure darkened the wood-paths into which he had plunged with his sister.

'Then you were not playing after all,' commented the Abbé Brossette, with a keen glance at La Péchina.

'Do not tease her,' said the Countess. 'Let us go home.'

La Péchina, spent though she was, drew from the force of her passion sufficient strength to walk—under the eyes of her adored master. The Countess followed immediately behind Michaud, along a foothpath known only to keepers and poachers, and so narrow that two could not walk abreast in it. It was a short cut to the Avonne gate.

'Michaud,' the lady began, when they had come half-way through the wood, 'the neighbourhood must be rid somehow or other of this good-for-nothing scamp. This child is perhaps in danger of her life.'

'To begin with,' returned Michaud, 'Geneviève shall

never leave the lodge. My wife shall take Vatel's nephew into the house; he keeps the walks in order in the park. We will replace him by a young fellow who comes from near my wife's home, for after this we ought to have no one about the Aigues whom we cannot trust. With Gounod in the house, and Cornevin, Olympe's old foster-father, the cows will be well looked after, and La Péchina shall never go out by herself again.'

'I shall ask the Count to make good the extra expense to you,' said the lady; 'but this will not rid us of Nicolas. How can it be done?'

'Oh, that is quite simple; there is a way ready made. Nicolas will have to go before the examining committee directly. Instead of interfering to get him off, as the Tonsards expect the General to do, he has only to give the authorities a hint——'

'I will go myself if need be to see my cousin Castéran at the prefecture,' said the Countess, 'but meanwhile, I am afraid——'

These few words were exchanged at the point where several paths met in a circle. The Countess climbed the bank by the ditch side, and, in spite of herself, a cry broke from her. Michaud went to her assistance, thinking that she had received a scratch from a bit of dead thorn, but he too shuddered at the sight that met his eyes.

Marie and Bonnébault, sitting on the bank side, were apparently chatting together; but evidently the pair had hidden themselves for purposes of eavesdropping. They had heard people come up in the forest, had recognised the voices of the gentry, and left their sentinel's post.

Bonnébault, a thin lanky youth, had served six years in a cavalry regiment. Some few months ago he had been discharged for good from the army for bad conduct; he was enough to spoil the best of regiments; and since then he had been hanging about Conches. With a pair

of moustaches, a tuft of beard on the chin, a certain presence and carriage that a soldier learns in barracks and drill, he had turned the heads of all the peasant girls in the valley. Bonnébault wore his hair, soldier fashion, clipped close to the back of the head, frizzed about the face, and brushed up jauntily behind on the temples. He tilted his foraging cap knowingly over one ear. Indeed, compared with peasants in rags and tatters like Mouche and Fourchon, he was a glorious creature in his linen trousers, leather boots, and short jacket. This attire, assumed since his discharge, smacked somewhat of half-pay and a countryman's life; but the cock of the valley had better clothes for high days and holidays. He lived, it may be said at once, on his sweethearts, and found his means barely sufficient for his amusements, potations, and various methods of going to the devil, a necessary consequence of hanging about the *Café de la Paix*.

There was something indescribably sinister in the rascal's round, featureless countenance, though at first sight he looked not unpleasing. He was cross-eyed; that is, he did not exactly squint, but his eyes sometimes 'went different ways,' to borrow a phrase from the studio, and this optical defect, slight though it was, gave him an underhand expression which made you feel uncomfortable; and the more so because a twitch of the forehead and eyebrows accompanied these movements of the eyes—a revelation of a certain inherent baseness and an innate tendency to go to the bad.

Of cowardice, as of courage, there be many kinds. Bonnébault, who would have fought on the field with the bravest, was pusillanimous before his vices and unable to resist his fancies. He was as lazy as a lizard, though he could be active enough when he chose; he had no sense of shame, he was proud and yet base, and the man who could do anything and did nothing, the 'breaker of heads and hearts,' to use a soldier's phrase, found his sole delight in mischief and worse. A character of this kind

is as dangerous an example in a quiet country place as in a regiment.

Bonnébault's aim, like Tonsard's and Fourchon's, was to live in comfort and to do nothing; and to that end he had 'laid himself out,' as Vermichel and Fourchon would say. By exploiting his figure, with increasing success, and his skill at billiards, with varying fortune, he flattered himself that in his quality of prop and pillar of the *Café de la Paix* he should one day marry Mlle. Aglaé Socquard, only daughter of the proprietor thereof. Socquard's café (making due allowance for relative position) was to Soulanges much what *Ranelagh* is to the Bois de Boulogne. To adopt the career of a bar-keeper, to be proprietor of a dancing-saloon—'twas a fine prospect, a very marshal's bâton, for a man who hated work.

Bonnébault's habits, life, and nature were written in such foul characters on his face that the Countess started at the sight of him and his companion as if she had seen a couple of snakes. It was this shock that had made her cry out.

Marie Tonsard was so infatuated with Bonnébault that for him she would have stolen outright. That moustache, that lounging military swagger, that low bully's air, went to her heart as the manners, bearing, and air of a De Marsay fascinate Parisian fair. Every social sphere has its bright particular stars. Marie was uneasy, she dismissed Amaury, the rival coxcomb of the little town. She meant to be Mme. Bonnébault.

'Hallo there! hallo! are you coming?' shouted Catherine and Nicolas in the distance; they had caught sight of the other pair.

The shrill cry rang through the woods like a savage's signal.

Michaud shuddered at the sight of the two creatures and bitterly repented his hasty speech. If Bonnébault and Marie had overheard the conversation nothing but

mischief would come of it. Some such apparently infinitely trifling matter was enough in the present exasperated condition of parties to bring about a decisive result, even as upon some battlefield victory and defeat have been decided by the course of some little stream which baulks the advance of the battery, though a shepherd's lad can cross it at a running jump.

Bonnébault took off his cap gallantly to the lady, took Marie's arm, and swaggered off in triumph.

'That is the *Clef-des-Cœurs* of the valley,' Michaud whispered, using a nickname of the French camp which means a Don Juan. 'He is a very dangerous character. He has only to lose a score of francs at billiards and he would be ready to murder Rigou. He is as ready for a crime as for pleasure.'

'I have seen more than enough for one day,' said the Countess, taking Émile's arm. 'Let us turn back.'

She watched La Péchina go into the house, and made Mme. Michaud a sad farewell sign; Olympe's dejection had infected the Countess.

'What is this, madame?' said the Abbé Brossette. 'Do the difficulties of doing good here really turn you away from making the attempt? For five years I have slept on a mattress and lived in a bare unfurnished parsonage-house, saying mass without a flock to listen to it, preaching to an empty church, officiating without fees or supplementary stipend; I have the State allowance of six hundred francs; I give away one-third of it, and have asked nothing of his lordship the bishop—and after all I do not despair. If you but knew what it is like in the winter here you would feel all the force of those words. I have nothing to warm me but the thought of saving this valley and winning it back to God. It is not a question of ourselves alone, madame; the future time is concerned. If we curés are put here to say to the poor, "Know how to be poor!" that is to say, "Bear your lot in patience and work," it is no less

our duty to bid the wealthy "Know how to be rich," which means, "Be intelligently beneficent, fear God, be worthy of the post He has assigned to you!"

'Well, madame, you are only depositaries of wealth and the power that wealth gives; if you fail to fulfil your trust you will not transmit that which you received to your children. You are robbing those that shall come after you! If you follow in the selfish ways of the *cantatrice*, whose supineness most surely caused the evils which have startled you by their extent, you will see yet again the scaffolds on which your predecessors died for the sins of their fathers. To do good obscurely in some out-of-the way nook, just as this Rigou, for example, is doing harm. . . . Ah! God in Heaven delights to hear the prayer that takes the form of such deeds as these!—If, in every commune, there were three human beings determined to do good, this fair France of ours would be saved from the depths towards which we are hurrying, dragged down as we are by a creed of indifference to all that does not directly concern ourselves!—First of all change your lives; change them and you will change your laws.'

Although the Countess was deeply moved by this outpouring of truly catholic charity, her only answer was the rich man's fatal formula, 'We shall see,' a put-off that contains sufficient promise in it to repel any immediate call upon the purse, while it leaves the speaker free in future to fold his arms when the mischief is done, and to plead that now it is too late.

Upon this the Abbé Brossette took leave of Mme. de Montcornet, and went by the nearest way to the Blangy gate.

'Is Belshazzar's Feast to be throughout all ages the symbol of the last days of a doomed class, oligarchy, or ruling power?' he asked himself when he had made ten paces on his way. 'O God, if it be Thy holy will to let loose the poor like a deluge that there may be a

new world, then I can understand that Thou wouldst abandon the rich man to his blindness.'

XII

SHOWS HOW THE TAVERN IS THE PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

MEANWHILE, by screaming at the top of her voice, Granny Tonsard had brought several people from Blangy, curious to know what could have happened at the *Grand-I-Vert*. Blangy itself was about as near to the tavern as the Blangy gate of the park. Among those attracted thus, who should be there but old Niseron—La Péchina's grandfather, who had just rung the second Angelus, and was on his way back to train the last vine-stems on his last bit of ground?

All the honesty left in the commune had taken up its abode in the old vinedresser, whose back was bent with toil, whose features were blanched and hair whitened with age. During the Revolution he had been the president of the Ville-aux-Fayes Jacobin Club and a sworn member of the local Revolutionary Committee. Jean-François Niseron was composed of the stuff of which apostles are made. In years gone by he had been the very image of Saint Peter, the saint whose portrait never varies with any painter's brush; he had the square forehead of the man of the people, the stiff crisped hair of the toiler, the proletarian's muscles, the fisherman's bronzed face, the powerful nose, the half-satirical mouth that laughs at ill-luck, and (a final characteristic) the shoulders of the strong man who will cut his faggots in the neighbouring wood and cook his dinner while doctrinaires are talking about it.

This was Niseron as a man of forty at the time when the Revolution broke out, a man as hard as iron and as

honest as the day. He took the side of the people, he put his faith in the Republic with the first mutterings of a word perhaps even more to be dreaded than the idea behind it. He believed in the Republic of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the brotherhood of man, the exchange of noble sentiments, the public recognition of merit, in a fair field and no favour, in a great many things, in fact, which, though quite practicable in a district no bigger than ancient Sparta, become Utopian visions when the area in question is expanded into an empire. He subscribed to his theories with his blood; his only son went to the frontier: he did more; for them he made the sacrifice of his pecuniary interests, that final immolation of self. He was the nephew and sole heir of the old curé of Blangy, who died and left all his money to pretty Arsène, his servant-girl; and though Niseron, as a tribune, was all-powerful in the district and might have helped himself to his heritage, he respected the wishes of the dead, and accepted the poverty which came upon him as swiftly as the decadence on his Republic.

Not a groat, not a branch of a tree belonging to another passed into his hands. If this sublime Republican could have founded a school the Republic would have been accepted. He declined to buy the National lands, denying the Republic the right of confiscation. In response to the demands of the Committee of Public Safety he was determined that the manhood of the citizens should work for the holy fatherland the miracles that political jugglers tried to effect with gold coin. The man of antiquity publicly upbraided Gaubertin senior with his treacherous double-dealing, with winking at corruption, with picking and stealing. He soundly rated the virtuous Mouchon, that Representative of the People, whose virtue mainly consisted in his incapacity, as was the case with plenty of his like who, strong with the might of a whole nation, with absolute command of the most enormous political resources that

ever nation put at the disposition of its rulers, attained fewer great achievements with the strength of a people, than a Richelieu with the weakness of a king. For these reasons Citizen Niseron became a living reproach to everybody else, and before long the good soul was overwhelmed and buried under the avalanche of oblivion by the terrible formula, 'Nothing pleases him!'—a catch-word in favour with those who have grown fat on sedition.

This 'peasant of the Danube' returned under his own roof at Blangy. He watched his illusions vanish one by one, saw his Republic become an appendage of the Emperor, and sank into penury under the eyes of Rigou, who deliberately ruined him with hypocritical regret. Do you ask why? Jean-François Niseron would not take a penny of Rigou. Reiterated refusals had taught the wrongful inheritor of old Niseron's goods the depth of the scorn with which the rightful heir regarded him. And, to crown all, the icy contempt had just been succeeded by the fearful threat as to the little granddaughter when the Abbé Brossette mentioned her to the Countess.

The old man had written a history of the twelve years of the Republic. It was a history written to suit his own notions; it was full of the grandiose traits for which those heroic times will be remembered for ever. The good man shut his eyes to all the scandals, slaughter and spoliation; he always dwelt admiringly on the self-sacrifice, the *Vengeur*, the 'patriotic gifts,' the enthusiasm of the people on the frontiers; he went on with his dream the better to sleep.

The Revolution made many poets like old Niseron, poets who sang their songs within our borders or in our armies, in their inmost souls, in the broad light of day, in many a deed done unseen amid the storm-clouds of those times; even as in the days of the Empire the wounded left forgotten on the field would cry 'Long

live the Emperor!' before they died. This sublimity is a part of the very nature of France.

The Abbé Brossette respected Niseron's harmless convictions. The old man in the simplicity of his heart had been won by a chance phrase: 'The true Republic,' the priest had said, 'is to be found in the Gospel.' And the old Republican carried the crucifix; and he wore the vestment, half-black, half-red; and he was decorous and serious in church, and he lived by the triple functions which he fulfilled, thanks to the Abbé Brossette, who tried to give the good man not a living, but enough to keep him from starving.

The old Aristides of Blangy said but little, like all noble dupes who wrap themselves round in the mantle of resignation; but he never failed to reprove evil-doing, and the peasants feared him as thieves fear the police. At the *Grand-I-Vert* they always made much of him, but he did not go there half-a-dozen times in a year. He would execrate the lack of charity in the rich, their selfishness revolted him, and the peasants always took this fibre in his nature for something that he had in common with them. They used to say, 'Old Niseron is no friend to the rich folk, so he is one of us'; and a noble life received by way of civic crown the comment, 'Good Daddy Niseron; there is not a better man!' He was not seldom called in to settle disputes, and in person realised the magic words, 'the village elder.'

In spite of his dire poverty he was exceedingly tidy in person. He always wore breeches, thick striped stockings, iron-bound shoes, the coat with big buttons that once was almost a national costume, and the broad-brimmed felt hat—such as old peasants wear even now. On working days he appeared in a short blue jacket so threadbare that you could see the manner of its weaving. There was a noble something that cannot be described in his face and bearing, the pride of a man who feels

that he is free and worthy of his freedom. In short, he wore clothes, and did not go about in rags.

'What has been happening out of the common, granny? I heard you from the steeple!' he remarked.

Then the old man heard the whole story of Vatel's frustrated attempt; every one spoke at once after the fashion of country folk.

'If you did not cut the tree, Vatel was in the wrong; but if you *did* cut the tree, you have done two bad things,' pronounced Father Niseron.

'Just take a drop of wine!' put in Tonsard, offering a brimming glass.

'Shall we set off?' asked Vermichel, looking at Brunet.

'Yes. We can do without Daddy Fourchon; we can take the deputy-mayor from Conches with us instead,' said Brunet. 'Go on ahead, I have a paper to leave at the château; Daddy Rigou has gained his case, and I must give notice of judgment.' And Brunet, fortified by a couple of nips of brandy, remounted his grey mare, with a good day to Father Niseron, for everybody in the valley looked up to the old man.

No science, nay, no practised statistician, can obtain statistics of the more than telegraphic speed with which news spreads through country districts, no account of the ways by which it crosses waste wildernesses (the standing reproach of French administrators and French capital). It is a bit of well-known contemporary history that a banker prince rode his horses to death between the field of Waterloo and Paris (for he, needless to say, was gaining what the Emperor had lost—to wit, a kingdom), yet after all he only reached the capital a few hours ahead of the disastrous tidings. So within an hour of the time when Granny Tonsard fell out with Vatel a good many regular customers had dropped in at the *Grand-I-Vert*.

The first to come was Courtecuisse. You would have found it hard to recognise in him the jolly game-

keeper, the fat Friar John, for whom it may be remembered his wife had boiled the coffee and milk on a certain morning not so very long back. He looked years older, he had grown thin and wan, a dreadful object-lesson to eyes that took no heed of the warning.

'He had a mind to go up higher than the ladder,' so it was said when anybody pitied the ex-keeper and blamed Rigou; 'he wanted to turn master.'

And, indeed, when Courtecuisse bought the *Bâchelerie* he had meant to 'turn master,' and had boasted as much. His wife went out collecting manure. Before daybreak she and Courtecuisse were at work digging their richly manured garden plot, which brought in several successive crops in the year, and yet they only just managed to pay Rigou the interest due on the balance of the purchase-money. Their daughter in service at Auxerre sent her wages to her father and mother; but do what they might, and in spite of this help, the balance was now due, and they had not a brass farthing.

Mme. Courtecuisse had been used to indulge now and again in a bottle of spiced wine and sugared toast. Now she drank nothing but water. Courtecuisse scarcely trusted himself inside the *Grand-I-Vert* lest he should be drawn into laying out three-halfpence. He was no longer a person to be courted. He had lost his free nips at the tavern, and like all fools he whined about ingratitude. In fact he was going the way of all peasants bitten with the wish to own land; he was ill-nourished, and found the work heavier and heavier as the food grew less.

'Courtecuisse has put too much in bricks and mortar,' said the envious. 'He should have waited till he was master before he began to plant wall-fruit.'

The simpleton had made improvements, brought the three acres sold by Rigou into high cultivation, and lived in fear of being turned out! The man who once wore leather shoes and sportsman's gaiters now went

about in sabots, and dressed no better than old Fourchon. And he laid the blame of his hard life on the gentry at the Aigues! Gnawing care had made the once chubby, jovial little man so dull and sullen that he looked like a victim of slow poison or some incurable disease.

'What can be the matter with you, M. Courtecuisse? Has some one cut your tongue out?' asked Tonsard, when the tale of the recent encounter had been told and the newcomer was silent.

'That would be a pity,' said La Tonsard; 'he has no call to complain of the midwife who cut his tongue-string; she made a good job of it.'

'Thinking of ways to pay off M. Rigou freezes your gab,' complained the old man, grown so much older in so short a time.

'Pooh!' said Granny Tonsard. 'You have a good-looking girl; she will be seventeen now; if she behaves wisely you will easily settle with that old scribbler yonder——'

'We sent her away to old Mme. Mariotte at Auxerre two years ago on purpose to keep her out of harm's way. I would sooner die than let her——'

'What a fool!' put in Tonsard. 'Look at my girls: are they dead? Any one who should say that they were not as steady as stone images would have to answer for it to my gun.'

'It would be very hard to have to go out of the place yonder!' cried Courtecuisse, shaking his head. 'I had sooner some one paid me for shooting down one of those *arminacs*!'

'Oh, a girl would do better to save her father than to keep her virtue till it mildews,' retorted Tonsard. He felt a little sharp tap on his shoulder as he spoke. It was Father Niseron.

'That was not well said,' began the old man. 'A father is the guardian of the honour of his family. It is just such doings that draw down contempt on us, and

they say that the people are not fit to have liberty. The people ought to set the rich an example of honour and civic virtues. You all sell yourselves to Rigou for gold; every one of you! When you do not give him your daughters, you sell your own manhood! That is bad.'

'Just see what Short Boots has come to!' said Tonsard.

'Just see what I have come to!' returned old Niseron. 'I sleep in peace; there are no thorns in my pillow.'

'Let him talk, Tonsard,' said La Tonsard in her husband's ear. 'You know very well that that is his crotchet, poor dear!'

Bonnébault and Marie, and Catherine and her brother all came in at that moment. All four were in a bad humour over the failure of Nicolas's scheme, and Michaud's proposal overheard by them had been the last straw. So Nicolas, once under the paternal roof, broke into a frightful outburst against the Aigues and the whole Michaud establishment.

'Here is the harvest beginning! Well, now, I am not going away until I have lighted my pipe at their ricks,' he shouted, bringing down his fist with a bang on the table at which he sat.

'There is no need to yelp like that before anybody and everybody,' said Godain, pointing to old Niseron.

'If he were to tell tales, I would wring his neck like a chicken's,' put in Catherine. 'He has had his day: a meddlesome old fault-finder! Virtuous they call him! It is his temperament, that is all!'

It was a strange and curious sight to see all the upturned faces of the folk gathered together in that den, while Granny Tonsard stood sentinel at the door, lest any one should overhear the talk over the liquor.

But the most alarming among all those faces belonged to Godain, Catherine's wooer; the most alarming and yet the least striking face in the tavern. Godain was a miser who lacked gold—a miser, that is, of the most

pitiless kind; does not the hoardless miser take precedence of the miser who broods over his treasure? The latter looks within himself, but the other gazes into the future with a dreadful fixity. This Godain was a type which seemed to represent the most numerous class among the peasantry. Godain was short, so short that he had been exempted from military service. He was naturally thin, and toil and the dull frugality which saps the life of such insatiable workers as Courtecuisse had still further dried him up. His little meagre face was lighted by two yellow eyes, streaked with green threads, and specked with brown. The greed of gain, of gain at any price, which shone in them, was steeped in a cold-blooded sensuality; desires once hot and vehement had cooled and hardened like lava. The skin was strained tightly over the brown, mummy-like temples, the hairs of a scanty beard grew here and there among the wrinkles like corn-stalks among the furrows. Nothing wrung sweat from Godain; he re-absorbed his substance. The sinewy, indefatigable hands like hairy claws might have been made of old seasoned wood. He was barely seven and twenty, yet there were white threads already among the rusty black hair.

As to dress, he wore a blouse, which gave glimpses through the fastening of a coarse linen shirt, which to all appearance he only changed once a month, and washed himself in the Thune. His sabots were mended with scraps of old iron. It was impossible to pronounce on the original material of his trousers, for the darns and patches which covered it were infinite. Finally, he wore a shocking cap, evidently picked up on the door-step of some tradesman's house in Ville-aux-Fayes.

Godain was clear-sighted enough to see the value of the elements of latent fortune in Catherine. He meant to succeed Tonsard at the *Grand-I-Vert*, and with that end in view he put forth all his cunning, all his power, to capture her. He promised her that she should be rich,

he promised that she should have all the licence which her mother had taken; before he had finished he had promised his future father-in-law a heavy rent for his tavern, five hundred francs a year until the place was paid for; Godain had had an interview with Brunet, and on the heads of that interview he hoped to pay in stamped paper. As a journeyman agricultural-implement maker, this gnome would work for the plough-wright when work was plentiful; but he took the highly-paid overtime jobs. He had invested some eighteen hundred francs with Gaubertin, but not a soul knew of the money, and he lived like a miserably poor man, lodging in a garret in his master's house, and gleaning at harvest-time, but he carried Gaubertin's receipt about him, sewn into the band of his Sunday trousers, and saw it renewed each year; each year the amount was a little larger, swelled by his savings and the interest.

'Eh! what's that to me?' shouted Nicolas, in reply to Godain's prudent observation. 'If I am to go for a soldier, I would sooner that the sawdust drank my blood at once, than give it drop by drop.—And I will rid the neighbourhood of one of these *arminacs* which the devil has let loose upon us.' And with that he told the tale of the so-called plot which Michaud had woven against him.

'Where would you have France look for her soldiers?' the old man asked gravely. During the silence that followed on Nicolas's hideous threat he had risen and faced the young man.

'A fellow serves his time in the army and comes back again,' said Bonnébault, curling his moustache.

Old Niseron saw that all the black sheep of the district had come together; he shook his head and went out, leaving a farthing with Mme. Tonsard to pay for his glass of wine. There was a general stir of satisfaction among those who sat drinking as soon as the good man had set foot on the steps. It would have been plain to

any onlooker that they all felt constraint in the presence of this embodiment of their conscience.

'Well, now, what do *you* say to all this, hey! Short Boots?' asked Vaudoyer, who suddenly appeared and heard the tale of Vatel's exploit from Tonsard.

Courtecuisse (short shanks), whose name was nearly always transformed in this way into 'short boots,' clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and set down his glass on the table.

'Vatel is in the wrong,' he answered. 'In the old mother's place, I should bruise my ribs and take to my bed, I would say I was ill, and I would summon the Upholsterer and his keeper for sixty francs of damages. M. Sarcus would give them to you.'

'Anyhow, the Upholsterer would give the money to avoid the fuss that might be made about it,' said Godain.

Vaudoyer, ex-policeman, five feet six inches in height, with a face pitted by the smallpox, and hollowed out after the nut-cracker pattern, held his peace, and looked dubious at this.

'Well, what now?' asked Tonsard, whose mouth watered for those sixty francs. 'What is ruffling you now, great noodle? Sixty francs to my mother would put me in the way of making something out of it! We will raise a racket for three hundred francs, and M. Gourdon might as well go up to the Aigues and tell them that mother's hip has been put out.'

'And they would put it out for her,' his wife went on; 'these things are done in Paris.'

'That would cost too much,' objected Godain.

'I have heard too much talk about the lawyers to feel sure that things will go as you wish,' Vaudoyer said at last; he had often been present in court, and had assisted ex-sergeant Soudry. 'At Soulanges it would be all right even now; M. Soudry represents the Government, and there is no love lost between him and the Upholsterer. But if you attack Vatel, they will be sharp enough to

defend the case; and they will say, "The woman was in the wrong; she had a sapling in her bundle, or she would have let the forester look into her faggots on the road; she would not have run away; and if anything happened to her, she has only her own misdoings to blame for it." No, it is not a case to be sure of.'

'Did the master defend the case when I summoned him?' said Courtecuisse. 'Not he. He paid me.'

'I will go to Soulanges if you like,' said Bonnébault, 'and ask M. Gourdon, the registrar, what he thinks, and I will let you know this evening if there is anything in it.'

'You only want an excuse for going to see that great goose, Socquard's girl,' said Marie Tonsard, slapping Bonnébault on the shoulder as if she meant to sound his lungs.

Just at that moment came a fragment of an old Burgundian Christmas carol:—

> 'A brave deed once He did, I wot,
> Whenas our Lord did dine,
> The water in the waterpot
> He turned to Malmsey wine.'

Everybody recognised Daddy Fourchon's voice, raised in a ditty which must have been peculiarly pleasing to the old man. Mouche piped an accompaniment in childish treble.

'Oh, they have had a blow out!' Granny Tonsard called out to her daughter; 'your father is as red as a gridiron, and the child is dyed the colour of a vine-stem.'

'Hail!' cried the old man, 'you rascals are here in full force!—Hail!' he added, turning suddenly on his grand-daughter, who had her arms about Bonnébault. 'Hail, Mary! full of vices, Satan be with thee, cursed be thou above all women, and the rest of it.—Hail, fellows! You are caught now! You may say good-bye to your sheaves! Here is news for you! I told you so, I told

you that the master yonder would be one too many for you! Well, then, he will have the law of you, and make you smart for it!—Ah! see what comes of measuring yourselves with the bourgeois! The bourgeois have made so many laws, that they have a law for every little thing——'

Here an alarming hiccough suddenly gave a new direction to the venerable orator's ideas.

'If Vermichel were here, I would blow down his throat; he should know what Alicante means! Ah! that is a wine! If I were not a Burgundian, I would be a Spaniard! A wine of God! The Pope says mass with it, I know! What a wine!—I am young again!—I say, Short Boots, if your wife were here—I think she would be young too! Spanish wine beats spiced wine; no question about it!—There ought to be another Revolution, only to clear out the cellars——'

'But what is the news, dad?' asked Tonsard.

'There will be no harvest for the like of you. The Upholsterer will put a stop to the gleaning!'

'Stop the gleaning!' Every voice in the tavern went up as one voice, dominated by the shrill notes of four women.

'Yes,' piped Mouche; 'and he will issue a proclamation by Groison, and have notices stuck up all over the canton; and no one is to glean except those who have paupers' certificates.'

'And, get hold of the meaning of *this*,' said Fourchon, 'other communes will not be allowed to sneak in.'

'What's up?' said Bonnébault. 'Neither my grandmother nor I, nor your mother, Godain, are to be allowed to glean here? Pretty tricks these of the authorities! Plague take them!—Why this General, your mayor, is a perfect hell-broke-loose——'

'Are you going to glean all the same, Godain?' asked Tonsard, turning to the ploughwright's assistant, who was talking aside with Catherine.

'*I?*' asked Godain. 'I have nothing; so I am a pauper, and I shall ask for a certificate.'

'Just tell me what they gave daddy for his otter, honey?' said the comely mistress of the house. Mouche, sitting on his aunt's knee, was quite overcome by the effort to digest his late meal; his eyes were heavy with the two bottles of wine consumed therewith, but he laid his head on his aunt's neck, and murmured cunningly—

'I do not know; but he has gold!—Keep me like a fighting-cock for a month, and I might find out for you where he hides his money, for he has a hoard somewhere.'

'Father has gold!' said La Tonsard in low tones, meant only for her husband, whose voice rose above the storm of heated discussion in which the whole tavern joined.

'Hush!' cried the old sentinel. 'Here's Groison!'

Deep silence prevailed in the tavern. When Groison might be supposed to be out of earshot, Granny Tonsard gave the signal, and again the discussion broke out: Would it be possible to glean as heretofore without a pauper's certificate?

'You will be made to obey, that is certain,' said old Fourchon, 'for the Upholsterer has gone to see the prefect and ask him to call the soldiers out to keep order. They will shoot you down like dogs—which we are!' wailed the old man, struggling with the torpid influence which the Alicante exerted on his tongue.

This second announcement made by Fourchon, preposterous though it was, produced an effect. The audience grew thoughtful; they quite believed that the Government was capable of massacring them without mercy. Bonnébault spoke—

'There was this sort of trouble round about Toulouse when I was stationed there,' said he. 'We marched out, the peasants were cut down and arrested.—It was a joke to see them trying to make a stand against regular troops. Ten of them were sent off to the hulks after-

wards and eleven more went to jail, and it all came to nothing, ay! A soldier is a soldier, and has a right to cut you civilians down, gee whoa!——'

'What is the matter with you all,' asked Tonsard; 'you are as scared as wild goats?—Perhaps they will catch my mother or my girls with something, will they? Some one is going to be locked up, eh?—Well, then, they will go to jail. The Upholsterer will not put the whole neighbourhood in jail. And if he does, the King will feed them better than they feed themselves; and they warm the cells in winter.'

'You are simpletons!' bellowed old Fourchon. 'It is better to lie low, it is, than to fly in the man's face. If you do, you will be paid out for it. If you like the hulks—that is another thing! The work is not so hard there as it is in the fields, it is true, but you have not your liberty.'

'Perhaps, after all,' began Vaudoyer, who was one of the boldest in counsel, 'it would be better that one of us should risk his skin to rid the country of the Beast of Gévaudan, that has his lair by the Avonne gate——'

'Settle Michaud!' said Nicolas. 'That is what I think.'

'Things are not ripe yet,' said Fourchon, 'we should lose too much, children. What we ought to do is to make a poor mouth, and cry out that we are starving; the master and his wife up at the Aigues will be for helping us, and you will make more that way than by the gleaning.'

'You are a chuckle-headed lot,' shouted Tonsard. 'Suppose that there is a racket with the police and the soldiers, they will not clap a whole countryside in irons, and there are the old *seigneurs*, and the folks at Ville-aux-Fayes; they are well disposed to back us up.'

'That is true,' said Courtecuisse. 'Nobody complains except the Upholsterer. M. de Soulanges and M. de Ronquerolles and the rest are content! When one

thinks that if that cuirassier had been man enough to be killed with the rest of them, I should be snug at my Avonne gate at this day, and that he has turned me topsy-turvy till I don't know whether I am on my head or my heels——'

'They will not call the soldiers out for a beggarly bourgeois who is at loggerheads with the whole neighbourhood round,' said Godain. 'It is his own fault. He must needs upset everything and everybody here; Government will tell him to go and hang himself.'

'That is just what Government will say; Government can't help itself — poor Government!' said Fourchon, smitten with a sudden tenderness for the Government. 'I am sorry for Government; 'tis a good Government. It is hard up and has not a sou, like us—which is a stupid thing for a Government when it coins the money itself.—Ah! if I were Government——'

'But they told me over at Ville-aux-Fayes that M. de Ronquerolles had said something in the Assembly about our rights,' cried Courtecuisse.

'Yes, I saw that in M'sieu Rigou's paper,' said Vaudoyer, who could read and write, in his quality of ex-policeman.

In spite of his maudlin tenderness, old Fourchon had been following the discussion, as well as the by-play which made it interesting, with close and intelligent attention. Suddenly he contrived to get on his feet and take up his position in the midst of the tavern.

'Listen to the old one, he is tipsy,' said Tonsard; 'he has twice as much mischief in him, his own and the wine——'

'Spanish wine! that makes three!' broke in Fourchon, laughing like a satyr. 'Children, you must not take the bull by the horns, you are not strong enough; take him in flank!—Sham dead, lie like sleeping dogs! The little woman has had a good frightening by now; things will

not go on like this much longer, you will see. Her will leave the place and if her goes the Upholsterer will go too, for he dotes upon her. That is the way to do it. But to hurry them away, I advise you to take their councillor from them, their stronghold, our spy, our *ape*.'

'Who is that?'

'Eh! why, 'tis the cursed curé!' said Tonsard, 'he that rakes up sins and would like to feed us on holy wafers.'

'Right you are!' cried Vaudoyer, 'we did very well without the curé. Something ought to be done to rid us of the wafer-eater. He is the common enemy.'

'The whipper-snapper' said Fourchon (this was a nickname given to the curé on account of his shabby appearance), 'may fall into the hands of some sly hussy, for he keeps every fast day. Then if he were caught on the spree there would be a fine hubbub, and his bishop would have to send him somewhere else. Old Rigou, good soul, would be mightily pleased. If Courtecuisse's girl would leave her place at Auxerre, she is so pretty that if she turned pious she would save the country. Ta, ran, tan ti!'

'And why should it not be *you*?' whispered Godain to Catherine. 'There would be a basketful of crowns to be made out of it for hush-money, and you would be mistress here at once.'

'Are we going to glean or are we not?' cried Bonnébault. 'Much I care for your Abbé. I am from Conches, and we have no parson there to harrow our consciences with his gab.'

'Wait a bit,' opined Vaudoyer. 'Some one ought to go to old Rigou (he knows the law) and ask him if the Upholsterer can stop our gleaning. He will tell us if we are in the right. If the Upholsterer is within the law, then we will see about taking him in flank, as the old one says.'

'There will be blood shed,' said Nicolas, rising to his

feet (he had finished off the bottle of wine which Catherine had set before him to keep him quiet). 'If you will listen to me, some one will bring down Michaud; but you are a sappy lot of dawdlers!'

'Not me!' said Bonnébault. 'If you are the friends to keep mum about it, I will undertake to bring down the Upholsterer myself! What fun to lodge a bullet in his bread-basket! I should have my revenge on all my stuck-up officers.'

'There, there!' cried Jean-Louis Tonsard, who had come in since old Fourchon entered. Some said that Gaubertin was Jean-Louis's father. The young fellow had succeeded to Tonsard's occupation of clipping hedges and arbours and the like offices. He went to well-to-do houses, chatted with masters and servants, and by dint of picking up ideas in this way he became the man of resource and most knowing member of the family. For the last few months Jean-Louis had paid court to Rigou's pretty servant girl, and in this matter, as will very shortly be seen, he justified the high opinion entertained of his shrewdness.

'Well, prophet, what is the matter?' asked his parent.

'You are playing the bourgeois' game, I tell you,' said Jean-Louis. 'Frighten the gentry at the Aigues so as to maintain your rights, well and good; but as for driving them out of the place and having the Aigues put up for auction, that is what the bourgeois want in the valley, but it is not to our interest to do it. If you help to divide up the big estates, where are the National lands to come from in the revolution that's coming? You will get the land for nothing then, just as old Rigou did; but once let the bourgeois chew up the land, they will spit it out in much smaller and dearer bits. You will work for them, like all the others who are working for Rigou. Look at Courtecuisse!'

The policy set forth in this harangue was too pro-

found for wine-flustered wits. Every one present, Courtecuisse excepted, was putting money by. Every one meant to have his share of the loaf of the Aigues. So they allowed Jean-Louis to talk on, and kept up private conversations among themselves, after the manner of the Chamber of Deputies.

'Well, now, you hear that! You will be Rigou's cat's-paws,' cried Fourchon, the only one who caught the drift of the speech made by his grandson.

Just at that moment Langlumé, the miller from the Aigues, happened to pass. La Tonsard hailed him.

'So it is true, is it, that they are going to stop the gleaning, Mister Deputy Mayor?'

Langlumé, a jovial-looking little man with a floury countenance and whitish-grey suit of clothes, came up the steps, and immediately every peasant looked serious.

'Lord, boys, yes and no. The really poor will glean; but the steps that will be taken will be greatly to your interests——'

'How so?' inquired Godain.

'Why, if they prevent all the poor folk from pouring in on us,' said the miller, with a shrewd Norman's wink, 'that will not hinder the rest of you from going to glean elsewhere; unless all the mayors copy the mayor of Blangy.'

'So, it is true?' asked Tonsard, with menace in his looks.

'For my own part,' said Bonnébault, as he tilted his foraging cap over one ear, and twirled his hazel switch till it whistled about him; 'I am going back to Conches to give warning to friends there.' And with that the Lovelace of the valley went out, whistling the tune of the martial ditty—

> 'You know the Hussars of the Guard,
> And you don't know the Trombone in the Band?'

'I say, Marie!' the old grandmother called, 'your sweetheart is going a droll way round to Conches.'

Marie sprang to the door. 'He is going to see Aglaé!' she cried. 'That goose of a girl yonder wants a good basting, once for all.'

'Here, Vaudoyer,' said Tonsard, 'just go and see old Rigou. Then we shall know what to be at. He is our oracle; what he spouts out costs nothing.'

'Here is another piece of folly,' exclaimed Jean-Louis under his breath. 'He does nothing for nothing. Annette spoke truth; he is a worse counsellor than anger.'

'I recommend you to be careful,' added Langlumé, 'for the General went to the prefecture about your misdoings, and Sibilet said that he vowed on his honour that he would go to Paris if need was, to speak with the Chancellor of France, the King, and the whole shop, but he would have the law of his peasants.'

'*His* peasants!'

'Oh, indeed! then perhaps we are not our own masters now?' asked Tonsard.

At this inquiry, Vaudoyer went in search of the ex-mayor, and Langlumé, who had already gone out, returned a step or two, and called back, 'You pack of do-nothings! have you incomes of your own that you have a mind to be your own masters?'

The words were spoken in jest, but the profound truth in them was felt something in the way that a horse feels a flick of the lash.

'Tra, la, la! you masters!—I say, sonny, after what you did this morning, you are more like to play a tune on the rifle than to have my clarinette in your fingers.'

'Don't you worry him; he is just the one to make you bring up your wine by punching your stomach,' said Catherine, turning savagely on her grandfather.

XIII

THE PEASANTS' MONEY-LENDER

STRATEGICALLY speaking, Rigou at Blangy was a sentinel at an outpost in time of war. He kept watch over the Aigues, and thoroughly he did his work! No police spy is comparable with an amateur detective in the service of hate.

When the General first came to the Aigues, Rigou must have had his own ideas concerning the newcomer, and plans, which came to nothing on Montcornet's marriage with a Troisville; at first he appeared to be well-disposed towards the great landowner. He had shown his intentions so plainly that Gaubertin judged it expedient to offer him a share of the spoil so as to involve him in the conspiracy against the Aigues. But before Rigou committed himself and accepted the part for which he was cast, he meant to force the General 'to show his hand,' as he put it.

One day after the Countess was installed, a tiny green-painted basket-chaise drove up to the main entrance of the Aigues. In it sat his worship the mayor, with the mayoress at his side. The pair stepped out of it and ascended the flight of steps on the terrace. But the Countess was a devoted partisan of the bishop, the clerical party, and the Abbé Brossette; and François reported that 'her ladyship was not at home.' The piece of impertinence, which might have been expected of a woman born in Russia, brought a yellow flush to the Benedictine's visage.

If the lady had felt any curiosity to see the man of whom the curé had said 'that he was a soul in hell who plunged into sin as into a bath to refresh himself,' she might perhaps have avoided that blunder. She would

have been careful not to arouse in the mayor that cold-blooded hatred which Liberals bore Royalists, a hatred that could not fail to increase, when the near neighbourhood kept the memory of a mortification ever fresh.

A few explanatory details concerning this man will have the double advantage of throwing light on Rigou's share of the 'big business,' as his two partners called it, and of portraying, at the same time, an extremely curious type. It is a rural product peculiar to France, and undiscovered as yet by any pencil. And more than this: every single detail is of immense importance considered in its bearing on the history of this valley; Rigou's house, his fashion of blowing his fire, his habits at table, his opinions and way of life—none of these things are insignificant from this point of view. In fact, the renegade illustrates in person democracy in theory and practice; he is its alpha and omega and *summum*.

Possibly you may remember the portraits of other Masters of Avarice, painted in preceding *Scènes*. The Provincial Miser, first and foremost—Goodman Grandet of Saumur, whose avarice was as much a part of his nature as the tiger's thirst for blood; next follows old Gobseck the bill-discounter, the Jesuit of Gold—for him the relish of money lay in the sense of power over others which it gave him, tears for him were as wine, and he was a connoisseur; then comes the Baron de Nucingen, who raised commercial cheating to the height of statecraft; and lastly, surely you recollect a study of the household miser—old Hochon of Issoudun—or that other, grown avaricious through family ambition, little La Baudraye of Sancerre?

And yet, so diverse are the shades of the same human affections, so different the colour they take up in passing through each human medium, and this is so especially the case with avarice, that there is another distinct type still left on the dissecting slab of the amphitheatre of the study of contemporary human nature. Rigou was

Rigou, the Selfish Miser, or, to be more precise, a miser full of tender cares for his own comfort, but hard and indifferent where others were concerned. He was, to be brief, the ecclesiastical miser, the monk who remained a monk so long as he could squeeze the juice of the lemon called Good Living, and took the secular habit the better to dip in the public purse. Let us begin by explaining how he had come to lead a life of unbroken ease and comfort under his own roof.

Blangy, to wit the cluster of some sixty houses described in Blondet's letter to Nathan, stands on rising ground on the left bank of the Thune. Each house is surrounded by its own garden, and in consequence Blangy is an extremely pretty village. Some few of the houses are down by the waterside, at the very top of the knoll stands the village church, and beside it the house that used to be the parsonage, the churchyard lying round about the apse end, after the country fashion.

Rigou took the opportunity of laying his sacrilegious hands on the parsonage-house, built in bygone days by that good catholic, Mlle. Choin, on a bit of ground bought by her for the purpose. The church was only separated from the parsonage by the width of a terraced garden, whence there was a view over the lands of Blangy, Soulanges, and Cerneux ; for the house stood between the parks of the two manors. A field lay on the side furthest from the church, a bit of land purchased by the previous curé a short time before his death. Rigou, by nature suspicious, had put up a wall about it.

As in due time the mayor declined to give up the parsonage-house for the purposes for which it was intended, the commune was obliged to buy a cottage for the curé near the church, and to lay out five thousand francs in setting it in order, enlarging it, and adding a bit of garden to it under the wall of the sacristy, so that there might be direct communication as heretofore between the curé's house and the church.

Both houses, therefore, being built on the alignment of the church, with which their gardens apparently connected them, looked out upon a square space, which might be considered as the market-place of Blangy, and this more particularly of late years, since the Count had built a communal hall, which served as a mayor's office, just opposite the curé's house, and had lodged the rural policeman in it. Furthermore, he had erected a school-house for the brothers of the *Doctrine chrétienne*, for which the Abbé Brossette had formerly pleaded in vain. The sometime Benedictine's house and the parsonage where the young curé lived, being both contiguous to the church, were as much united as separated by the edifice, and furthermore, they overlooked each other, and consequently the whole village knew all that went on in the Abbé Brossette's household.

The village street wound uphill from the Thune to the church, and the Knoll of Blangy was crowned by strips of vineyard and peasants' gardens and a patch of copse.

Rigou's house was the best in the village; it was built of the large flints peculiar to Burgundy, laid in yellowish mortar smoothed out in squares the size of the width of the trowel, which produced a series of wavy lines with a flint surface, usually black, protruding here and there from the mortar. Bands of yellow mortar, unspotted by flints, did duty for stone facings round the windows, the surface (in course of time) being covered with fine meandering cracks, such as you behold in old ceilings. The clumsy outside shutters were conspicuous by reason of thick coats of dragon-green paint. Scales of lichen concealed the joints of the slates on the roof. It was a typical Burgundian house, such as the traveller may see by thousands as he crosses this part of France.

The house door opened upon a corridor, in the middle of which the wooden staircase rose. As soon as you entered you saw the door of a large sitting-room lighted

by three windows, which looked out into the square. The kitchen, contrived underneath the staircase, looked into a yard neatly paved with cobble-stones, with a large double-leaved gate on the side of the street. So much for the ground floor.

There were three rooms on the first story, and a little attic filled the space in the roof above.

Outside, in the yard, a wood-shed, stable and coach-house occupied the side at right angles to the house; and on a floor above the rickety erection there was a fruit-loft and a servant's bedroom. Opposite the house stood the cowshed and the pigsties.

The garden was about an acre in extent and enclosed by walls. It was a cure's garden, full of espaliers, fruit-trees, and trellis vines, and sanded garden walks with pyramid fruit-trees on either side, and squares of pot-herbs manured with stable litter. The croft above the house had also been planted with trees and enclosed within walls; it was a space large enough to keep a couple of cows all the year round.

Inside the house the sitting-room was wainscoted to elbow height and hung with old tapestry. The furniture of walnut wood, brown with age, and covered with needlework, was in keeping with the old-fashioned rooms and ceiling. The three main beams were visible and painted, but the intervening spaces were plastered. Above the walnut-wood chimney-piece stood a grotesque mirror, its sole ornament with the exception of two brass eggs mounted on marble pedestals. These objects split in half; you turned back the upper part on its hinge and it did duty as a candle-sconce. This kind of convertible candlestick with its little ornamental chains is an invention of the days of Louis XV., and is beginning to grow scarce.

On a green and gold bracket set in the wall opposite the windows stood a clock, an excellent time-keeper in spite of its cheap case. The curtains, suspended from

rings on an iron curtain-rod, were fifty years old at least, and made of a cotton material, of a checked pattern, very similar to the cottons printed in pink and white squares that used to come from the Indies. A sideboard and a table completed the list of furniture, which was kept spotlessly clean.

By the hearth stood a huge easy-chair, dedicated to Rigou's sole use; and in the corner above the low what-not, which he used as a desk, hung a pair of bellows from a brass-headed nail of the commonest kind. To that pair of bellows Rigou owed his prosperity.

From this bald description, which rivals an auctioneer's sale-catalogue for brevity, the reader might easily be led to imagine that the furniture of M. and Mme. Rigou's respective chambers was limited to strict necessaries, which would be a delusion. Rigou's parsimony was not of the kind that denies itself any material comfort. Wherefore the most fastidious fine lady could have slept luxuriously in the bed made for Rigou; the mattresses were of the best, the sheets fine and soft, the down bed had once been the gift of some devout woman to a reverend churchman. Ample curtains shut out cold draughts. And, as will be seen, it was the same with everything else.

At the outset the miser had reduced his wife, who could neither read, write, nor cipher, to slavish obedience. She, poor creature, had ruled her late master, only to become her husband's servant and drudge. She cooked and washed for him with little or no help from the young person named Annette, a very handsome girl of nineteen, as much a slave to Rigou as her mistress, with thirty francs a year for her wage.

Mme. Rigou was tall, gaunt, and wizened-looking; all the red in her sallow face was gathered on the cheek-bones; her head was always tied up in a handkerchief, and she wore the same skirt all the year round. She did not pass a couple of hours out of her house in a month,

and spent her consuming energy on household work, in a way which only the most zealous domestic could or would have done. It would have puzzled the keenest observer to discover in the woman a trace of the splendid figure, the fresh Rubens colouring, the full-blown comeliness, the superb teeth, the maiden glances that first attracted Curé Niseron's attention to the girl. A single confinement (she had one daughter, Mme. Soudry junior) had decimated her teeth, bleared her eyes, and withered her complexion; her eyelashes had fallen out. It seemed as if the hand of God had been heavy on the priest's wife.

Yet, like every well-to-do farmer's wife, she loved to look through her stores of silk, in the piece and unworn dresses.

Her drawers were full of laces and trinkets, which only caused Rigou's young servant-girls to commit the sin of envy, and to wish her death; her finery had never served any other purpose. She was one of those half-animal creatures who are born to live instinctively. As the once lovely Arsène had been no schemer, the late Niseron's disposition of his property would be an insoluble mystery but for the clue. An odd circumstance had inspired him with the notion of disinheriting his kin. The story ought to be told for the benefit of that vast proportion of mankind who have expectations.

There had been a time when Mme. Niseron, the Republican's wife, had overwhelmed her husband's uncle with attentions, for there was an imminent prospect of succeeding to the property of an old man of seventy-two, and some forty and odd thousand francs would be enough to keep the family of his only relation and heir-at-law in very tolerable comfort. The late Mme. Niseron was somewhat impatiently expecting this desirable increase of fortune, for, beside her son, she was the happy mother of a sweet little girl, a mischievous, innocent child. Perhaps it is because such children are doomed to die in

childhood, that in their childhood they are so complete, for the little one died at fourteen of 'pale colour,' as chlorosis is popularly called. She was the will-o'-the-wisp of the parsonage, and as much at home in her great-uncle's house as in her own. She had it all her own way there. She was fond of Mademoiselle Arsène, the handsome servant-maid whom the curé took into his house in 1789. Revolutionary storms had even then relaxed ecclesiastical discipline. Hitherto he had had an elderly housekeeper, but old Mlle. Pichard felt that she was failing, and sent her niece Arsène, thinking, no doubt, to hand over her rights to that comely damsel.

In 1791, soon after the old curé offered an asylum to Dom Rigou and Frère Jean, little Geneviève took it into her head to play a very innocent childish prank. One day at the parsonage Arsène and several children were playing at the game in which each child in turn hides some object which the others try to find, and calls out, 'Burning!' or 'Freezing!' as the seekers are nearer or further from the object. Little Geneviève, seized with a sudden whim, hid the bellows in Arsène's bed. The bellows could not be found, the children gave up the game, Geneviève's mother came to bring her home, and the child quite forgot to hang the bellows from the nail again.

For a whole week Arsène and her aunt looked for the bellows, then they too 'gave it up'; it is possible to live without a pair of bellows, the old curé blew up his fire with an old ear-trumpet, made in times when everybody had one, which proves beyond a doubt that the curé's ear-trumpet had belonged to some courtier of the time of Henri III. But at length, about a month before the aunt died, the Abbé Mouchon, the curé from Soulanges, and the whole Niseron family came to dinner at the parsonage, and the housekeeper broke out into renewed Jeremiads over the bellows which had so mysteriously disappeared.

'Eh!' cried little Geneviève Niseron, bursting out laughing. 'Why, I hid them in Arsène's bed a fortnight ago; if she had made her bed, the great lazy thing, she would have found them.'

In 1791 every one was free to laugh; but the deepest silence followed the laughter.

'There is nothing to laugh at,' said the old housekeeper; 'Arsène has been sitting up with me since my illness began.'

In spite of this explanation, the curé of Blangy looked daggers at Mme. Niseron and her husband, such a look as a priest can give when he thinks that a trap has been laid for him.

Then the housekeeper died, and Dom Rigou managed to exasperate the Abbé Niseron against his nephew to such purpose that François Niseron was disinherited by a will made in Arsène Pichard's favour.

All this had happened long ago, but in 1823 grateful sentiment still led Rigou to blow the fire with the ear-trumpet, and the pair of bellows still hung from the nail.

Mme. Niseron doted on her little girl, and when the child died in 1794 the mother followed her within the year. When the curé died, Citizen Rigou took the burden of Arsène's concerns upon himself by taking her to wife. The sometime lay-brother from the abbey attached himself to Rigou as a dog does to a master, and in his own person combined the offices of groom, dairyman, gardener, body-servant, and steward to this sensual Harpagon.

Rigou's daughter Arsène was married (without a portion) to the public-prosecutor, Soudry junior; she inherited some share of her mother's good looks, together with her father's cunning.

Rigou had reached the age of sixty-seven. For thirty years he had not known illness; nothing seemed to shake health that might well be called insolent. He was tall and spare. There were brownish circles about

his eyes, and the eyelids were almost black. In the morning, when he exhibited a red, wrinkled, morocco-grained throat, his resemblance to a condor was but the more strikingly complete by reason of a nose of sanguine hue, immensely long, and very sharp at the tip. He was almost bald, the curious conformation of the back of his head would have alarmed any one who understood its significance; for that long ridge-shaped prominence indicates a despotic will. The greyish eyes, half veiled by membranous webs of eyelids, were made to play a hypocrite's part. Two locks of hair, of no particular colour, and so scanty that they failed to hide the skin beneath, hung about the large, pointed, rimless ears: a noticeable defect this last, for it is a certain sign of cruelty—that is a love of inflicting mental (not physical) pain—when it does not indicate mental unsoundness. An exaggeratedly wide mouth and thin lips betrayed their owner for an undaunted trencherman and a valiant drinker by a certain droop at the corners, where two comma-shaped slits slobbered perpetually while he ate or talked. Heliogabalus must have looked like that.

His dress never varied. He always wore a long blue overcoat with a military collar, a black stock, a pair of trousers and a roomy waistcoat of black cloth. He had hobnails put in the heavy soles of his walking shoes, and in cold weather he wore additional soles, knitted by his wife in winter evenings. Annette and her mistress also knitted their master's socks.

Rigou's baptismal name was Grégoire, a circumstance which suggested puns that his circle of acquaintance still found irresistibly amusing, in spite of thirty years of hard wear. He was usually saluted as 'Grig' or 'Rigadoon,' or (and most frequently of all) as *Grigou* (G. Rigou)—curmudgeon.

Want of opposition and absence of any public opinion had favoured the old Benedictine's favourite pursuits. No one would imagine from the brief outline sketch of

his character how far he had advanced in the science of selfishness, of material comfort, and sensual enjoyment of every kind. In the first place, he took his meals apart. His wife and Annette waited upon him, and then sat down to table in the kitchen with Frère Jean while the master of the house digested his meal, slept off his wine, and read the paper.

In the country no periodical is known by a specific name; it is always spoken of as 'the paper.'

Dinner, breakfast, and supper were alike composed of dishes exquisitely prepared with the culinary skill in which a cure's housekeeper excels the rest of her sisterhood. Mme. Rigou herself, for instance, churned twice a week. Cream entered into every sauce. Vegetables, gathered at the last moment, were transferred as it were straight from the garden into the pot. Parisians are so accustomed to garden stuff which has lain sweltering in a shop exposed to the genial influences of the sun, the tainted air of city streets, and the greengrocer's watering-can, all promotive of a specious freshness, that they have no idea of the delicate, fugitive flavours of vegetable products when eaten in some sort 'alive.'

The Soulanges butcher supplied his best meat, under penalty of losing the redoubtable Rigou's custom. The poultry were reared at the house, to ensure superlative excellence.

A kind of hypocritical care was likewise expended on everything that conduced to Rigou's comfort. The deeply-versed Thelemist might wear slippers of coarse-looking leather, but within they were lined with the softest lamb's-wool. His coat might be rough and coarse, for it never touched his skin, but his shirts (always washed at home) were of the finest Frisian lawn. The wine of the country was good enough for his wife, Annette, and Frère Jean—Rigou kept some of his own vintage for this purpose—but his own private cellar was stocked like a Fleming's; the noblest wines of Burgundy were tightly

packed among wines from the Rhone, and Bordeaux, Champagne, and Roussillon, and Spain. All these were purchased ten years in advance, and bottled by Frère Jean. The liqueurs from the Indies bore the name of Mme. Amphoux; the money-lender had laid in sufficient of these from the wreckage of a Burgundian château to last him the term of his natural life.

Rigou ate and drank like Louis XIV., one of the largest consumers on record; the wear and tear of a life more than voluptuous betrayed itself in this constant demand for repairs. Yet while he denied himself nothing, he was a keen and hard bargain-driver; he would haggle over every trifle as only a churchman can haggle. He did not trouble himself overmuch, shrewd monk that he was, with precautions against cheating; he provided himself with a sample beforehand, and had the agreement made out in writing, but when the wine or the provisions were despatched he gave the senders notice that if the bulk did not correspond in every way with the sample he should refuse delivery.

Frère Jean, who looked after the fruit, had set himself to acquire the art of keeping the finest 'orchard stuff' in the department through the winter. Rigou had pears and apples, and occasionally grapes, at Easter.

Never was prophet on the borderland of deity more blindly obeyed than Rigou in every smallest whim. At a twitch of those heavy eyelids, his wife, Annette, and Frère Jean quaked for mortal fear, and of the very multiplicity of his demands he forged the chains that bound his three slaves. At every moment of their lives those hapless creatures felt conscious that they were watched, that they were under an overseer's lash; and at length they had come to take a kind of pleasure in the incessant round of toil; they were too hard-worked to feel bored, and this man's comfort was the one all-absorbing thought that filled their lives.

Annette was the tenth in a succession of comely maid-

servants since the year 1795. Rigou hoped and meant that similar relays should mark his passage to the tomb. Annette was sixteen years old when she came; at the age of nineteen she must go. Every one of these damsels, chosen from Auxerre, Clamecy and the Morvan with fastidious care, had been beguiled by bright prospects. But Mme. Rigou clung obstinately to life, and invariably when the three years were out some squabble brought about by the girl's insolence to her unhappy mistress made it imperatively necessary to part with her. Annette was a masterpiece of delicate beauty, bright and piquante, worthy to wear a ducal coronet. She was a clever girl moreover. Rigou knew nothing of the understanding between Annette and Jean-Louis Tonsard, which proves that he was smitten with the one pretty damsel to whom ambition had suggested the idea of flattering the lynx by way of throwing dust in his eyes.

The uncrowned Louis XV. on his side was not wholly faithful to the pretty Annette. The peasants borrow to buy land beyond their means; Rigou held oppressive mortgages on these properties, and the result of it was that he made a harem of the whole valley from Soulanges to a distance of fifteen leagues beyond Conches in the direction of Brie, and this at no cost to himself. He needed only to grant stay of proceedings as the price of the fleeting pleasures on which age often wastes its substance.

This sybarite's life, therefore, cost him almost nothing, and Bouret himself could scarce have surpassed it. Rigou's white slaves cut his hay and gathered his harvests, and brought and stacked his firewood. A peasant thinks little of giving his labour, especially if he can put off the evil day of payment of interest in that way; and though Rigou always demanded small money payments as well for a few months' grace, he squeezed some manual service out of his debtors into the bargain. They submitted to this forced labour, this *corvée* in all

but name, and thought that it cost them nothing because they had not to put their hands into their pockets. It sometimes happened that a peasant paid more than the original sum as interest on the capital lent.

Deep as a monk, silent as a Benedictine in travail of his chronicle, astute as a priest, shifty as every miser is bound to be, yet always keeping on the windward side of the law, Rigou might have made a Tiberius in ancient Rome, a Richelieu in the days of Louis XIII., or a Fouché if he had had ambition enough to assist the Convention; but in his wisdom he chose to be a Lucullus in private life, a miser-sensualist. Hatred gave zest to this occupation of harassing the Count; he had every means of doing it thoroughly, and it found him mental employment. He could move the peasants at his will by secret wires, and he enjoyed the game that he played. It was like a living chess-tournament, all the pawns were alive; knights rode about on horseback, bishops babbled like old Fourchon, the towers of a feudal castle glittered in the sun, and the queen was maliciously giving check to the king.

Every day as Rigou rose he looked out of his window at the stately roof of the Aigues; he could see the smoke rising from the lodges by those lordly gateways, and to himself he would mutter, 'All this shall be pulled down, I will dry up the streams, and cut down the shady forest.' And while he hunted his large quarry he had a more insignificant prey. The château was to fall, but the renegade flattered himself that he would murder the Abbé Brossette by pin-pricks.

It is only necessary to add, by way of a final touch to the portrait, that the sometime monk made a practice of going to mass, regretting that his wife continued to live, and manifesting a desire to be reconciled with the Church so soon as he should be a widower. He greeted the Abbé Brossette deferentially when they met, speaking suavely, never allowing his temper to get the better

of him. Indeed, generally speaking, every man who has been connected with the Church appears to possess the long-suffering of an insect. To her discipline her servants owe a sense of decorum which has been signally lacking among the Frenchmen of the last twenty years, and which those who look upon themselves as well-bred men do not always possess. When the Revolution shook ecclesiastics out of their convents and threw them upon the world, the children of the Church gave proof of their superior training by a coolness and reticence which never forsook them even in apostasy.

That little matter of the will in 1792 had opened Gaubertin's eyes to the depths of guile concealed by that face, with its taint of guileful hypocrisy, and from that time forth he made a confidant of the fellow-worshipper of the Golden Calf. When the firm of Leclercq was founded he gave Rigou a hint to invest fifty thousand francs in the venture and guaranteed the undertaking. Rigou became a sleeping partner of so much the more consequence because he left his money at compound interest. At the present time his interest in the house amounted to a hundred thousand francs, although in 1816 he had drawn out about eighty thousand to put into the funds, an investment which brought him in seventeen thousand francs per annum. Lupin knew of his own knowledge that Rigou had at least a hundred and fifty thousand francs lent out in mortgages for small amounts on large bits of property. Ostensibly the money-lender derived a net income of fourteen thousand francs or thereabouts from land. Altogether, it was pretty plain that Rigou's income must amount to something like forty thousand francs, but his capital was an unknown x, a fourth term in a proportion sum which baffled arithmetic, and the devil alone knew the ins and outs of the jobbery in which Rigou and Langlumé were concerned.

The terrible money-lender reckoned on another score

of years of life, and had invented a set of hard and fast rules for his guidance in business. He never lent a farthing to a peasant unless the man was a purchaser of seven acres at the least, and had actually paid down one half of the purchase-money. Clearly Rigou was well aware of the weak spot in our legislation with regard to the expropriation of small parcels of land, and of the danger to the Inland Revenue Department and the land-owning interest arising from the excessive sub-division of property. Where is the sense of suing a peasant for the value of a single furrow when the man has but five furrows altogether? The eyes of individual interest will always see twenty-five years ahead of the furthest vision of any legislative assembly. What a lesson for a nation! A law that is not a dead letter always springs from the mighty brain of a single man of genius, it is not made by laying nine hundred heads together; no matter how able the men may be, taken apart, they dwarf each other in a crowd. After all, in Rigou's rule is there not the right principle? What better means have we of putting a stop to the present state of things, when land-owning is reduced to an absurdity and a square yard of soil is divided into halves and thirds, and quarters and tenths, as in the commune of Argenteuil, which numbers thirty thousand parcels of land?

Such reforms, however, demand co-operation as widespread as the arrangement which oppressed this arrondissement. As Rigou found Lupin about one-third of the total amount of legal business which he transacted, it was natural that the Soulanges notary should be Rigou's faithful ally. In this way the pirate could add the amount of illegal interest *to the capital* in the bond, and if the borrower was a married man he was careful to make husband and wife jointly and severally responsible. The peasant, overjoyed to have but five per cent. to pay, so long as the loan was undischarged, always hoped

to rid himself of the debt by unsparing toil, and by high farming which raised the value of Rigou's security.

This is the real secret of the wonders worked by the 'spade husbandry' that deludes superficial economists, a political blunder which sends French money into Germany to pay for horses. That animal is in process of extinction in France, while the grazing and breeding of horned cattle has fallen off to such an extent that butcher meat will soon be beyond the reach, not merely of the working population, but also of the class above them.[1]

So sweat poured for Rigou from many a brow between Conches and Ville-aux-Fayes, and Rigou was respected by everybody; while the General, who paid his workers well and was the one man who brought money into the country, was cursed for his pains and hated as the rich man is hated of the poor. Would such a state of things be comprehensible but for the foregoing bird's-eye view of Mediocracy?

Fourchon had spoken truth when he said that the bourgeois had taken the place of the seigneurs. Peasant-proprietors of the Courtecuisse type were the serfs of a modern Tiberius in the valley of Avonne, just as, in Paris, the manufacturer without capital must slave for the large capitalist's benefit.

Soudry followed Rigou's example. His area extended from Soulanges to Ville-aux-Fayes and five leagues beyond; the two money-lenders had divided the district between them.

Gaubertin's greed was on a grander scale. Not merely did he himself avoid competition with his associates, but he diverted the capital of Ville-aux-Fayes from these profitable local investments. The power exercised at elections by this triumvirate may be imagined when nearly every voter's fortunes depended upon his complacence.

[1] See *Le Curé de Village.*

Hatred, ability, and command of money—this was the formidable triangular array of the enemy entrenched by the Aigues, an enemy who watched all the General's movements, an enemy in constant communication with sixty to eighty small proprietors, each of whom had relatives or connections among the peasantry, who feared one and all of them as debtors fear a creditor.

Rigou was a Tonsard of a larger growth. Tonsard lived by plain theft. Rigou grew fat on legalised robbery. Both were fond of good living; both men were essentially of the same species, but the one was nature uncultivated, the other, nature submitted to the sharpening discipline of the cloister.

It was about four o'clock that afternoon when Vaudoyer left the *Grand-I-Vert* to ask counsel of the ex-mayor, and Rigou dined at four. Vaudoyer, finding the house door shut, peered in between the window-curtains.

'M. Rigou!' he called. 'It is I—Vaudoyer.'

Frère Jean came out of the yard gate in another moment, and bade him come in with him.

'Come into the garden,' said he, 'the master has company.'

The 'company' was none other than Sibilet, who had come under the pretext of arriving at an understanding with regard to Brunet's recent notice of judgment; but as a matter of fact the pair were discussing a very different matter. He had come in just as the usurer was finishing his dessert.

A dazzling white cloth was spread on the square table (Rigou insisted on clean table-linen every day, caring little for the trouble given to his wife and Annette), and the visitor beheld the arrival of a bowl heaped up with strawberries and apricots, peaches, figs, almonds, and all the fruits in season, served, almost as daintily as at the Aigues, upon green vine-leaves, laid on white porcelain plates.

When Sibilet came into the room, Rigou bade him bolt the double doors (an arrangement adapted to every room in the house, with the double object of keeping out draughts and deadening sounds). Then he inquired what urgent business had brought the steward in broad daylight, when it was so much simpler and safer to come after dark.

'It is this,' said Sibilet. 'Here is the Upholsterer talking of going to Paris to see the Keeper of the Seals. He is capable of doing you a lot of harm; he may ask to have your son-in-law displaced, or for a change of judges and president too at Ville-aux-Fayes, more particularly when he comes to read the notice of this new decision in your favour. He is in a towering rage. He is shrewd too, and the Abbé Brossette who advises him is one that can enter the lists against you and Gaubertin.—The priests are in power just now, and his lordship the bishop is very friendly with the Abbé Brossette. The Countess said something about speaking to her cousin (the Comte de Castéran) concerning Nicolas. Then Michaud is beginning to see how the land lies.'

'You are afraid,' said Rigou. The words were spoken quite blandly, but the glance that accompanied them was appalling; suspicion brought something like a gleam into the dull eyes. 'Are you calculating whether it would pay you better to throw in your lot with M. le Comte de Montcornet?'

'I don't exactly see how I am to come honestly by four thousand francs every year to put by, as I have been doing these last five years,' said Sibilet bluntly. 'M. Gaubertin has promised me all sorts of fine things, but matters are coming to a head, there will certainly be a collision, and it is one thing to promise, and another to keep your promise after the battle is won.'

'I will speak to him,' said Rigou quietly, 'and in the meantime this is what I should say if it were any busi-

ness of mine.—"For the last five years you have been taking four thousand francs a year to M. Rigou, and he, worthy man, is paying you seven and a half per cent per annum. At this present moment you have twenty-seven thousand francs standing to your credit, for the money has been accumulating at compound interest; but as there is a certain document under private seal extant, and M. Rigou has a duplicate copy, the steward of the Aigues will be dismissed on the day when the Abbé Brossette lays that document before the Upholsterer, more especially if an anonymous letter is sent beforehand to warn him that his steward is playing a double game. So you would do better to hunt with us, without asking for your bone in advance, and so much the more so since that M. Rigou is not legally bound to pay you either compound interest or seven and a half per cent on your money; and if you tried to recover, he would let you sue him and pay the money into court; and before you could touch your twenty thousand francs the matter would be spun out with delays till judgment was given in the court of Ville-aux-Fayes. If you behave yourself discreetly, when M. Rigou is owner of your house at the Aigues property, you might keep on there with thirty thousand francs of your own, and thirty thousand more which he might feel disposed to lend you; and that would be so much the better for you, because as soon as the Aigues is split up into little lots, the peasants will be down upon them like poverty upon the world." That is what M. Gaubertin might say to you; but for my own part I have nothing to say, it is no business of mine.—Gaubertin and I have our grounds for complaint against this child of the people who beats his own father, and we are carrying out our own ideas. If Friend Gaubertin needs you, I myself have need of nobody, for every one is very much at my service. As to the Keeper of the Seals, 'tis an office that changes hands pretty often, while some of us are always here.'

'At any rate, you have had warning,' said Sibilet, feeling that he had been a consummate ass.

'Of what?' demanded Rigou, with artful subtlety.

'Of the Upholsterer's intentions,' said the steward meekly; 'he has gone to the prefecture in a towering rage.'

'Let him go. If Montcornet and his like did not wear out carriage wheels, what would become of the coach-builders?'

'I will bring you three thousand francs to-night at eleven o'clock,' said Sibilet; 'but you might help me on a little by making over one of your mortgages to me; one where the man is getting behind-hand—one that might bring me one or two nice little bits of land——'

'There is Courtecuisse's mortgage. I want to handle him carefully, for he is the best shot in the department. If I transferred him to you, it would look as though the Upholsterer were harassing the rascal through you, and that would kill two birds with one stone. He would be ready for anything when he saw that he was sinking lower than old Fourchon. Courtecuisse is wearing his life out at the Bâchelerie; he has been putting in espaliers along the garden walls, and altogether the place has improved very much. The little farm is worth four thousand francs; the Count would give you that much for the three acres of land behind his stables. If Courtecuisse were not a gormandising rogue, he would have paid the interest with the game killed there.'

'Very well. Transfer the mortgage to me; it will put butter on my bread. I shall have the house and garden for nothing, and the Count will buy the three acres.'

'What am I to have?'

'Good Lord! you would draw blood from a stone!' cried Sibilet. 'And here have I just got an order out of the Upholsterer to set the law in motion to regulate the gleaning.'

'You have gained that point, have you, my lad?' asked Rigou, who had himself suggested the idea to Sibilet a few days previously, and recommended him to pass it on in the shape of advice to the General. 'We have him now! It is all over with him! But it is not enough simply to have a hold on him; he must be twisted up like a quid of tobacco. Just draw the bolts, my lad, and tell my wife to bring in coffee and liqueurs for me, and tell Jean to put the horse in. I am going over to Soulanges. See you again in the evening!—Good-day, Vaudoyer,' the ex-mayor beheld his former rural policeman. 'Well, what is it?'

Vaudoyer gave a full account of the day's events at the *Grand-I-Vert*, and ended by asking Rigou whether the General had the law on his side.

'He has a right to do so,' said Rigou decisively. 'We have a hard lord of the manor, and the Abbé Brossette is a shrewd fellow. Your curé put these notions into his head, because you don't go to mass, you pack of heretics! *I* am careful to go myself. There is a God, you see!—You will have to drink to the dregs, the Upholsterer will always be beforehand with you——'

'Very good. We will glean,' said Vaudoyer, in the dogged tone of a Burgundian.

'Without a pauper's certificate?' queried the usurer. 'They say that he has gone to the prefecture to ask for the soldiers so as to make you return to your duty——'

'We will glean as we have done in the past,' Vaudoyer repeated.

'Glean! M. Sarcus will see if you are right,' said the money-lender, and his manner seemed to promise that the justice of the peace would protect the gleaners.

'We will glean, and we shall be there in force—or Burgundy will no longer be Burgundy,' said Vaudoyer. 'If the gendarmes have swords, we have scythes, and we shall see!'

At half-past four the great green-painted yard-gates of the old parsonage turned on their hinges, Frère Jean appeared leading the bay horse by the bridle, and the chaise turned out into the square. Mme. Rigou and Annette stood on the step in front of the house door watching the little green basket-chaise and the master ensconced on the snug cushions under the leather hood.

'Don't stay out late, sir,' said Annette, with a little pout of the lips.

By this time all the village had heard of the mayor's threatened proclamation, and the folk came to their doors, or stopped short in the main street, to watch Rigou pass. They thought that he was going to Soulanges to defend their rights.

'Well, well, Mme. Courtecuisse, our old mayor will be going to take our part, no doubt,' said an old woman with a spindle in her hands; she was deeply interested in the question of forest rights, for her husband sold the stolen faggots in Soulanges.

'Dear me! yes; it makes his heart bleed to see such things going on, he is as sorry about it as any of you,' answered Courtecuisse's wife. Poor woman, she quaked at the bare mention of the money-lender's name, and praised him from sheer fear and trembling.

'Ah! I don't want to make too much of it; but he has been badly treated, he has!—Good-day, M. Rigou,' said the old woman as she span, for Rigou gave a greeting to her as well as to his creditor's wife.

The money-lender crossed the Thune (never impassable in the worst of weather), and Tonsard, stirring abroad, spoke to Rigou on the road. 'Well, Father Rigou, so the Upholsterer means to make slaves of us, does he?'

'We shall see about that,' returned Rigou, touching up his horse.

'He will find a way of defending us, he will!' said Tonsard to a group of women and children who had gathered about him.

'Oh! he has you in mind; an innkeeper has his gudgeons in mind as he cleans his frying-pan,' remarked Fourchon.

'You just keep your clapper quiet when you are drunk,' said Mouche, with a tug at his grandfather's blouse, which sent the old man over on to the mound at the foot of a poplar. 'If the rascally monk heard what you said, he would not give so much for your words——'

As a matter of fact, the real cause of Rigou's hasty visit to Soulanges was the weighty news which Sibilet had brought, news that seemed to threaten the secret coalition among the bourgeoisie of the Avonne valley.

BOOK II

I

THE BEST SOCIETY OF SOULANGES

Six kilometres from Blangy, 'be the same more or less' (to borrow the legal formula), and at a like distance from Ville-aux-Fayes, the little town of Soulanges rises amphitheatre-fashion up a hillside, a spur of the long *côte* which runs parallel to the other ridge above the Avonne. Soulanges the Picturesque, as they call it, has a better claim to the title than Mantes itself.

Under this long low hill the Thune widens out over a bed of clay into a sheet of water some thirty acres in extent, with all the mills of Soulanges dotted over the little cluster of islands at the end, composing a picture as charming as any that the landscape gardener's art can devise. Further yet the Thune feeds all the rivers and artificial water in Soulanges park, and flows at last through a stately channel to join the Avonne.

Opposite the town stands the château of Soulanges, one of the finest manor houses in Burgundy, built in the reign of Louis xiv. from Mansard's designs. The local road winds between the town and the aforesaid sheet of water, vaingloriously dubbed 'the Lake of Soulanges' by the townspeople.

The picturesqueness of the little place is Swiss rather than French in character; you shall scarcely find such another town in France. Blondet, it may be remembered, compared it in his letter to Swiss scenery, and, in fact, it

reminds you of the charming outskirts of Neuchâtel, the gay vineyards that engirdle Soulanges heightening a resemblance which would be complete but for the absence of Alps or Jura range. The streets rise one above another on the hillside; the houses stand apart in separate gardens, so that the general effect of the town is not the usual one of a crowd of dwellings packed together, but of masses of greenery and blue or red roofs among the flowers and trees, pleached alleys, and terraced walks, of many-coloured detail blended into a picturesque whole.

In the Middle Ages the lords of Soulanges, in their munificence, built the church of stone, reserving for themselves a chapel in the choir and another chapel in the crypt for their family vault. A border of richly ornamented circles filled with small carved figures follows the outline of the great arch of the doorway (as at the church of Longjumeau), and a shaft terminating in a pinnacle stands in a niche on either side. Up above, in a triglyph, sits a sculptured virgin with the Infant Saviour in her arms. It is a kind of doorway common enough among such little churches of that date as have had the luck to escape the ravages of the Calvinists. The outer walls of the aisles consist of five arches, outlined by mouldings, and filled in with masonry pierced here and there by windows. The flying buttresses of the apse are worthy of a cathedral. The square-based belfry tower, built over one of the chancels, is a landmark in the countryside, for the church stands at the upper end of the great market-place at Soulanges, through which the road passes on its lowest side.

This market-place at Soulanges is a fair-sized open space surrounded by a collection of quaint-looking houses built about it at various times. A good few of them are built half of brick, half of timber, with a waistband of slates about their middles to protect the principal beams. These have stood there since the Middle Ages. Others, built of stone and adorned with balconies, display the

gable beloved of our grandsires, which dates back as far as the twelfth century. Several attract your eyes by their quaint jutting beams covered with grotesque figures, which call up memories of the times when every burgher was a merchant and lived above his shop. But most magnificent of all is the sculptured façade of the ancient mansion-house of the Bailiwick, standing in a line with the church, to which it furnishes a worthy companion-building. This old house was sold by the nation and bought by the commune, to do duty as townhall, mayor's office, and court-house, for M. Sarcus had sat there since the institution of justices of the peace.

This outline sketch will give the reader some idea of the market-square of Soulanges, where the charming central fountain stands which the Maréchal de Soulanges brought from Italy in 1520. No great city need blush to own such a monument. A jet of water, brought from a spring high up on the hillside, plays perpetually over a group of four white marble Cupids, who bear a basket full of grapes on their heads, and distribute the water from the conch shells in their hands.

Perhaps Émile Blondet is the last lettered traveller who will pass that way; but if in the coming time another should penetrate to Soulanges, he will at once recognise in the market-square, the 'public place' of Spanish drama and Molière's plays, an old familiar piece of stage scenery, and abiding witness to the fact that comedy is the invention of a warm climate, where the business of life is largely carried on out of doors and in public. The market-place at Soulanges resembles the conventional square of the stage the more closely in that the two principal streets of the town enter it from either side just opposite the fountain, furnishing an exact equivalent of the wings whence masters and servants issue to meet, and whither they fly to avoid each other.

At the corner of one of these streets, Maître Lupin's

scutcheon hung, gloriously conspicuous. The square is the aristocratic quarter of Soulanges; Sarcus, Guerbet the receiver of taxes, Brunet, Gourdon the registrar, and his brother the doctor, and old M. Gendrin-Vattebled, Crown Agent of Woods and Forests, all lived round about it, and being mindful of the name given to their town, all made a point of keeping their houses in handsome repair.

'Mme. Soudry's house,' as it was called (for the first person in the commune was totally eclipsed by the potent personality of the late Mlle. Laguerre's waiting-woman) —Mme. Soudry's house was entirely modern. It had been built by a wealthy wine merchant, a Soulanges man who had made money in Paris and returned in 1793 to buy corn for his native town. The mob massacred him for a 'regrater,' a miserable stonemason (Godain's uncle) having raised the cry after a dispute which arose out of the building of the fine new house.

The next-of-kin quarrelled so long and heartily over the property, that when Soudry came back in 1798 he was able to buy the wine merchant's palace for one thousand crowns *in coin*. He let it at first to the department for a police-station; but in 1811 Mlle. Cochet (whom he consulted on all points) warmly opposed a renewal of the lease; it was impossible to live in a house 'in concubinage with the barracks,' she said. So a police-station was built in a side street close to the townhall for the gendarmerie, at the expense of the town of Soulanges, and the police-sergeant's house, being relieved of the defiling presence of the gendarmerie and their horses, was forthwith swept and garnished.

It is a single story house, with attics in the mansard roof. On three sides it looks out over a wide view; to wit, over the market-place, the 'lake,' and the garden; but the fourth gives upon the yard which lies between it and the neighbouring house of a grocer—Wattebled by name —a man who did not move in the 'best society' in

Soulanges. He was the father of the 'beautiful Mme. Plissoud,' of whom more must presently be said.

Every little town has its 'beautiful Madame Such-an-one,' just as it boasts its Socquard and its Café de la Paix.

It is easy to guess that the side of the house which overlooks the lake likewise looks out upon a terraced garden, sloping, not over steeply, down to the stone balustrade, which borders it along the roadside. On every step of the flight which descends from the terrace to the garden stands a myrtle, or pomegranate, or an orange-tree, visible justifications of a small conservatory below—a *preservatory*, as Mme. Soudry persistently miscalls it. The house door on the side of the market-place is approached by a short flight of steps. The great gateway is seldom used, except on great occasions, after the usual habit of a country town, or to admit the tradespeople or the master's horse. The friends of the family paid their calls on foot, and climbed the flight of steps to the street door.

The Soudry mansion is a dreary-looking house. Every course of masonry is marked out by 'channel joints,' as masons call them; the mouldings round the windows are alternately thick and thin, after the style of the Gabriel and Perronnet wings of the Tuileries. Such architectural ornament in a very small town gives a monumental look to a house already grown famous in the district.

In the opposite corner of the market-place stood Socquard's celebrated Café de la Paix, which, with the too enchanting Tivoli, deserves a more detailed description in its place than the Soudry mansion.

Rigou very seldom came to Soulanges; for everybody, Lupin the notary, Gaubertin, Soudry, and Gendrin alike went to Blangy to call on him—such fear men had of Rigou. But any experienced person, and the ex-Benedictine was experienced, would have imitated his reserve.

In order to make this clear, it is necessary to give a sketch of the personages who were spoken of in the neighbourhood as belonging to the 'best society of Soulanges.'

The oddest figure among them all was, as you may imagine, Mme. Soudry herself. Hers is a portrait that demands an infinity of minute touches, if it is to do justice to the original.

Mme. Soudry permitted herself 'a suspicion of rouge,' in imitation of Mlle. Laguerre; but that suspicion, by sheer force of habit, had become an unmistakable patch of vermilion on either cheek, such as our grandsires picturesquely described as 'carriage wheels.' As the wrinkles deepened and multiplied on the mayoress's countenance, she fondly tried to fill them up with paint; then finding that her brow grew too sallow by far, and her temples showed time's polish, she laid on ceruse, and traced out a network of youthful veins in a delicate blue. The painting enhanced the liveliness of eyes that were bold enough already, insomuch that the mask would have struck a stranger as something passing strange; but Soulanges, being accustomed to this brilliant display of art, regarded Mme. Soudry as a great beauty.

With a clumsy shapeless figure she wore her gowns cut low at the throat, displaying shoulders and bosom whitened and enamelled to match her face; but, luckily, a desire to flaunt her magnificent laces induced her to partially veil these chemical products. She always wore a stiff corset bodice of prodigious depth, bedizened with knots even down to the extreme point, and her skirts rustled with silk and furbelows.

Her apparel justified the use of the word *attire*, which will soon be inexplicable. This evening she wore brocade of price, for she had a hundred dresses, each one richer than the last, all from Mlle. Laguerre's vast and splendid wardrobe, and all remodelled by her in the height of the fashion of the year 1808. Mme. Soudry's gorgeous

cap, adorned with loops of cherry-coloured satin to match the ribbons on her gown, seemed to ride triumphant on the powdered waves of her yellow wig.

Try to imagine beneath that too fascinating headgear a monkey face of monstrous ugliness; a snub nose, meagre enough for a Death's head, separated by a broad space of bristles from a mouthful of artificial teeth in which the sounds were entangled as in a hunting-horn—and though it may puzzle you to discover how the best society, and, in fact, the whole town of Soulanges, could regard Mme. Soudry as a beauty, the mental process may recall to your mind a recent succinct treatise *ex professo* by one of the wittiest women of our day on the art of acquiring a reputation for beauty by the judicious selection and management of accessories.

Mme. Soudry had, in the first place, surrounded herself with the splendid presents which had been heaped upon her mistress—*fructus belli*, as the sometime Benedictine called them. And, in the second, she had turned her ugliness to account by emphasising it and carrying it with a certain air which can only be acquired in Paris, a knack known to the vulgarest Parisienne, who is always more or less of a mimic. Mme. Soudry's figure, much restricted round the waist, was enormous about the hips; she wore diamonds in her ears, and loaded her fingers with rings; and, by way of final adornment, a cock-chafer, twin topazes with a diamond head, blazed from the height of her bodice in a cleft between two mountains besprinkled with pearl powder. This jewel, a gift from 'dear mistress,' was the talk of the department. Mme. Soudry's arms were invariably bare (another practice copied from Mlle. Laguerre), and she fluttered an ivory fan painted by Boucher with two tiny roses by way of stud-pins.

When Mme. Soudry walked abroad she carried a real eighteenth century parasol above her head, a bamboo frame covered with green silk, and bordered with a green

fringe; thus equipped, any passer-by who should have seen her on the terrace might have taken her (at a sufficient distance) for a figure out of one of Watteau's pictures.

In that drawing-room, hung with crimson brocade and crimson curtains lined with white silk, where the chimney piece was covered with knick-knacks and souvenirs of the palmy days of Louis Quinze, with the fire-dogs and andirons on the hearth (lily stems borne aloft by infant Cupids), where the furniture, *à pieds de biche*, was covered with gilding, it was conceivable how the mistress of the mansion had come by the title of 'the beautiful Mme. Soudry.' The house came to be a kind of local superstition in the principal town in the district.

And if the best society of Soulanges believed in its queen, that queen had no less belief in herself. In the space of seven years La Cochet had so completely succeeded in sinking the lady's-maid in the mayoress, that not merely had Soulanges forgotten her late employment, but she herself had begun to believe that she was a gentlewoman. So well did she remember her mistress's ways, her manner, her gestures, her falsetto voice, the little movements of her head, that when she surrounded herself with that mistress's opulence she reproduced her insolence. Mme. Soudry knew her eighteenth century; she had anecdotes of great nobles, like their inter-relationships, at her fingers' ends, and her back-stairs erudition provided her with a stock of conversation which smacked of familiarity with *Œil-de-bœuf*. Her waiting-woman's wit passed current in her circle for the most refined *esprit*. Intrinsically, if you will, the mayoress was a counterfeit gem, but how should barbarians know the difference between the diamond and its paste imitation?

She, too, in her own circle was a divinity, as her mistress had been in her day; she was flattered by those who were sure of a dinner at her house once a week, and

of coffee and liqueurs if (as not seldom happened) they dropped in of an evening about the time of dessert. No woman's head could have stood the powerful intoxicating influence of that never-failing incense. In the winter-time, when the cosy drawing-room was bright with the light of wax-candles, she saw it filled with the wealthiest men in the place, who repaid her in compliments for delicate liqueurs and exquisite wines from 'dear mistress's' cellars. The friends of the house and their wives had to all intents and purposes the usufruct of this luxury, while they economised in fuel and candle-light. For which reasons it was proclaimed for five leagues round about, nay, at Ville-aux-Fayes itself, when the notables of the department were passed in review, that 'Mme. Soudry makes an admirable hostess; she keeps open house, and it is a wonderfully pleasant house. She understands how to live up to her fortune. She can enjoy a joke. And what handsome plate! There is not such another house out of Paris!'

Bouret had given that plate to Mlle. Laguerre. It was a splendid service, the work of the great Germain, and, in plain language, La Soudry had stolen it; when Mlle. Laguerre died, the woman simply took it up to her own room, and the next-of-kin, who knew nothing about their property, could never put in a claim for missing items.

For some little time it had been the fashion among the twelve or fifteen persons of whom the 'best society' in Soulanges was composed to speak of Mme. Soudry as of an 'intimate friend of Mlle. Laguerre,' and to fight shy of the word 'waiting-woman.' To hear them talk, La Cochet might have sacrificed herself by becoming the great actress's companion.

Strange, but true it is, that all these confirmed illusions spread and grew in Mme. Soudry, till they invaded the reality-requiring region of the heart. She ruled her husband despotically.

The gendarme being constrained to show fondness for a wife, older than himself by ten years, who kept the purse-strings in her own hands, encouraged her in the notions which she entertained of her beauty. Nevertheless, at times, when this one or that envied him his good fortune, he would wish that they could exchange places with him; and he was at as great pains to hide his peccadilloes as if a young and idolised wife were in the case. Only within the last few days had he contrived to introduce a pretty housemaid into the establishment.

Does the portrait of the queen of Soulanges seem to be something of a caricature? The type might still be found here and there in the provinces in those days, among women on the outskirts of nobility or the higher regions of finance; witness the widow of a farmer-general in Touraine, who still applied fillets of veal to her face in the interests of her complexion. But the present portrait, painted to the life though it is, is incomplete without its setting of brilliants, and the queen's principal courtiers must be sketched, were it only to explain how formidable such Lilliputians may become, and to throw light upon the dissemination of opinion in out-of-the-way places.

Lest any should be deceived, it may be said that there are places like Soulanges which cannot be described as either city, town, or village, yet partake of the nature of all three. In such places the faces of the people are quite different from those which you shall see in the heart of our good, overgrown, dirty provincial cities; for the townsman is half a countryman, and this blend produces some of the queerest of queer characters.

Mme. Soudry disposed of, Notary Lupin, steward of the manor of Soulanges, ranks second in importance; for it is scarcely worth while to mention old Gendrin-Vattebled, the Crown Agent of Woods and Forests, a nonagenarian on the brink of the grave, who had never left his house since the advent of Mme. Soudry.

Gendrin-Vattebled had reigned over Soulanges in his quality of a man who had held the same post since the time of Louis xv., and in his lucid intervals he still spoke of the jurisdiction of the *Table de Marbre*.

Five-and-forty springs had bloomed for Lupin, but he was still fresh and pink-complexioned, thanks to the full habit of body which grows inevitably upon a man of sedentary life; he still sang his ballad, and wore the elegant costume of the drawing-room performer. In his carefully varnished boots and waistcoat of brimstone-yellow, his tight coats, rich silk stocks, and trousers in the latest fashion, Lupin looked almost like a Parisian. He had his hair curled by the hairdresser, who fulfilled the functions of the *Gazette* in Soulanges, and altogether lived up to the character of lady-killer, earned by an intimacy with Mme. Money-Sarcus; for, to compare small things with great, that conquest had been in his life pretty much what the Campaigns of Italy were in the career of Napoleon. Lupin was the only one of the circle who went to Paris, where he paid visits to the Soulanges family in town. He had only to open his mouth, and the supremacy of his sway exercised in his double character of coxcomb and man of taste was at once apparent. He pronounced judgment on all things by three words, the positive, comparative, and superlative of dispraise—*rusty*, *out-of-date*, and *obsolete*.

A man or a woman or a piece of furniture might be 'rusty'; then, to mark the comparative degree of futility, 'out-of-date'; and finally, by way of superlative and third term, 'obsolete.' *Obsolete!* 'twas the critic's 'dead-and-done-with,' the domdaniel of contempt. Mere 'rust' might be rubbed off, 'out-of-date' was past praying for; but '*obsolete!*' oh, better never to have issued from nothingness!

For praise, Lupin was reduced to the word 'charming,' redoubled if required. 'Charming!'—that was the positive term of admiration; 'charming! charming!'—

you might set your mind at rest. 'Charming! charming! charming!'—you might throw down the ladder, for the heaven of perfection had been scaled.

This scrivener—he was wont to speak of himself as the scrivener, quill-driver, and petty attorney, jestingly putting himself above his calling—this scrivener carried on a flirtation with the mayoress, who felt a certain weakness for Lupin, although he had fair hair and wore spectacles, and La Cochet had always admired dark men with moustaches, and tufts upon their finger-joints—the Hercules type, in short. But now she made an exception in Lupin's favour on account of his elegance, feeling, besides, that her social trumph in Soulanges would be incomplete without an adorer; though as yet, to Soudry's disgust, none of the queen's adorers had dared to overstep the limits of respectful homage.

Lupin was a baritone, somewhat given to sample-singing in corners or upon the terrace, by way of reminding the world of his social gift, a reef upon which the socially-gifted and, alas! sometimes even men of genius are apt to make shipwreck.

He had married an heiress in sabots and blue stockings, the only daughter of a salt merchant who made his fortune during the Revolution, when the reaction against the *gabelle* put enormous sums into the pockets of salt smugglers. Lupin prudently kept his wife in the background, and Bébelle was sustained by a Platonic passion for his very handsome head-clerk, one Bonnac, who had nothing but his salary, and played upon a lower stage the part taken by his employer in the 'best society.'

Madame Lupin's education had been prodigiously neglected. She only appeared in public on state occasions, in the form of an enormous tun of Burgundy draped with velvet, and surmounted by a little head deeply sunk in a pair of shoulders of uncertain hue. By no effort could her girdle be induced to stay in its natural place, and Bébelle candidly admitted that prudence for-

bade her to wear corsets. It would have out-tasked the imagination of a poet, nay, of an inventor, to discover in Bébelle's back any trace of the bewitching curves of the vertebral outline of any woman who is a woman.

Bebelle, as round as a tortoise, belonged to some invertebrate feminine order. Her appalling development of cellular tissue must, however, have been not a little reassuring for Lupin whenever he thought of the portly Bébelle's little fancy—for 'Bébelle' he unblushingly called her, and nobody thought of laughing.

'What do you call your wife?' Money-Sarcus inquired one day. He could not digest the 'out-of-date' applied to a new piece of furniture which he had bought as a bargain.

'My wife, unlike yours, is still undefined,' retorted Lupin.

A subtle brain lurked beneath Lupin's coarse exterior; he had the sense to hold his tongue about wealth at least as considerable as Rigou's fortune.

'Young Lupin,' Amaury Lupin, was an affliction to his parent. He refused to follow the paternal calling, he became one of the Don Juans of the valley, and abused the privileges of an only son by enormous drains on the cash-box; yet he never exceeded his father's indulgence, for after each fresh escapade Lupin senior remarked, 'After all, I was just the same in my time.' Amaury never went near Mme. Soudry, who 'plagued him' (*sic*). Some memory had inspired the waiting-woman with the notion of 'forming' a young man who sought his pleasures in the billiard-room at the *Café de la Paix*. Amaury Lupin frequented low company, and even the society of such as Bonnébault. He was having his fling (as Mme. Soudry put it), and his one answer to his father's remonstrances was the cry of 'Send me to Paris, I am tired of this!'

Lupin's fate, alas! was that of most bucks, a quasi-conjugal entanglement. It was well known that he was

passionately attached to Mme. Euphémie Plissoud, whose husband was Brunet's fellow clerk of the peace, and that he had no secrets from her. The fair Euphémie, the daughter of Wattebled the grocer, reigned, like Mme. Soudry, in a lower social sphere. Plissoud, who was understood to authorise his wife's conduct, was despised on this account by the 'best society,' and regarded as second-rate.

If Lupin was the vocalist, Dr. Gourdon was the man of science in the 'best society.' It was said of him that, 'We have here a man of science of the first rank;' and Mme. Soudry, a competent critic in matters musical (in that she had announced Messieurs Gluck and Piccini when they came to call of a morning upon her mistress, and had dressed Mlle. Laguerre at the Opéra at night)—Mme. Soudry, who had persuaded every one, including Lupin himself, that he would have made a fortune with that voice, would deplore the fact that the doctor had given none of his ideas to the world.

Dr. Gourdon, who took all his ideas straight from Buffon and Cuvier, could scarcely have set himself up for a man of science in the eyes of Soulanges with such an outfit, but he was making a collection of shells and a *hortus siccus*, and could stuff birds to boot—in fact, he coveted the distinction of leaving a Natural History Museum to the town, and on these grounds he was accepted all over the department as a second Buffon.

In appearance Dr. Gourdon was not unlike a Genevese banker. He had the same air of pedantry, the same chilly manner and puritanical neatness; but in his case the money, like the business shrewdness, had been omitted. He was wont to exhibit with exceeding complacency his famous natural history collection, comprising a stuffed bear and a marmot (deceased on their passage through the town), a very complete collection of the local rodents, shrew mice, field mice, house mice, rats, and the like, together with all the rare birds shot in that

part of Burgundy, and conspicuous among these last an Alpine eagle caught among the Jura. Gourdon also possessed a good many specimens of *lepidoptera*—a word which raised hopes of monstrosities, so that the reality was usually greeted with, 'Why, they are butterflies!' —a very pretty collection of fossil shells, which for the most part had come to him by way of bequest; and, to conclude the list, a quantity of specimens of the minerals of the Jura and Burgundy.

The whole first floor of Dr. Gourdon's house was occupied by these treasures which were established behind glass doors in cupboards, above rows of drawers full of insects. Nor did they fail to produce a certain impression, due partly to the eccentricities of the labels, partly to the magic charm of colour, and partly also to the vast number of objects which no one notices out of doors, though they become wonderful as soon as they are set behind a sheet of glass. There was a day set apart for going to see Dr. Gourdon's collection.

'I have five hundred ornithological specimens,' he would announce to the curious, 'two hundred mammals, five thousand insects, three thousand shells, and seven hundred specimen minerals.'

'What patience you must have had!' the ladies would exclaim, and Gourdon would reply, 'A man ought to do something for his native place.'

Gourdon's vanity drew a prodigious toll from his dead beasts and birds by the remark, 'All this has been left to the town in my will'; and how his visitors admired his 'philanthropy'! They talked of devoting the whole second floor of the townhall (after the doctor's death) to the housing of the Gourdon Museum.

'I count on the gratitude of my fellow townsmen to associate my name with my collection,' he would say in reply to this suggestion, 'for I do not dare to hope that they will set my bust there in marble——'

'Why, surely that would be the least that they could

do for you!' would be the answer, 'are you not the glory of Soulanges?' And in the end the man came to look upon himself as one of the great men of Burgundy.

The safest investments are not the public funds, but those which are inscribed in the name of self-love, and the learned naturalist, on Lupin's grammatical system, might be described as a 'happy, happy, happy man!'

Gourdon, his brother, the registrar of the court, was a little weasel-faced man. All his features seemed to have crowded themselves together in the neighbourhood of his neck, in such a sort that his nose was a kind of starting-point whence the various lines of forehead, cheek, and mouth went their various ways, much as all the ravines on a mountain side begin at its summit. He was one of the great poets of Burgundy, a second Piron, so it was said. The double merit of the brothers attracted notice in the chief town of the department.

'We have the two brothers Gourdon at Soulanges,' it was said, 'two very remarkable men, men who would more than hold their own in Paris.'

The poet was an exceedingly dexterous player at cup-and-ball, a mania which bred another mania, for it inspired him with the idea of celebrating in verse a game which had so great a vogue in the eighteenth century. (The manias of mediocracy are apt to appear in pairs.) Gourdon junior was delivered of his poem during the time of Napoleon, so it is needless to mention the sound and sensible school to which he belonged. Luce de Lancival, Parny, Saint-Lambert, Roucher, Vigée, Andrieux, and Berchoux were his heroes, and Delille was his idol until the day when the best society in Soulanges raised the question whether Gourdon did not surpass Delille. From that time forth the registrar spoke of his model as *Monsieur l'Abbé Delille* with unnecessary courtesy.

Poems achieved between the years 1780 and 1814 were all modelled on the same pattern; and the great

poem on the *bilboquet*, or cup-and-ball, may be taken as a representative specimen. Boileau's *Lutrin* is the Saturn of a whole abortive progeny of playful pieces, most of them limited to four cantos, for it was generally recognised that the subject-matter was apt to grow thin in six.

Gourdon's poem on the cup-and-ball—the *Bilboquéide*—obeyed the rules of poetical composition invariably observed in such cases, for all these departmental compositions are made from the same pattern. The first canto describes the subject of the poem, and begins, like Gourdon's effort, with an invocation much on this wise :—

> 'I sing the Sport which suits with every Age
> The Small and Great, the Simple and the Sage;
> When our deft Hand the boxwood Spike extends
> To catch the transpierced Globe as it descends,
> Delightful Pastime, sovran cure for Spleen,
> If Palamedes had this Toy foreseen,
> How had he longed another Wreath to claim,
> And envied us the invention of the Game!
> Muse of the Loves of Laughter and of Glee
> Descend upon my roof and visit me,
> A votary of Themis striving still
> Official paper with my Rhymes to fill,
> Descend and charm.' . . .

Then followed a description of the game itself, and of the most elegant *bilboquets* known to history, an account of the part they played in the prosperity of the *Green Monkey* and other toyshops, a digression touching statistics in this connection, and finally Gourdon brought his first canto to an end with three lines which recall the conclusion of every similar production—

> 'Thus do the Arts, nay, even Science' self,
> Taking the Object into their employ,
> Turn to their profit Pleasure's trifling Toy.'

The second canto (as usual) described diverse manners

of using the 'object' and the ways in which it might serve its owner in society and with the fair sex. It will suffice to quote a single passage in which the player goes through his exercises beneath the eyes of the 'beloved object,' and the rest may be left to the imaginations of amateurs of this serious literature—

> 'Watch yonder Player 'mid the gazers all,
> His eye fixed fondly on the iv'ry Ball,
> How heedfully he spies with caution nice
> Its Movement in parabola precise.
> Thrice has the Globe described its curve complete,
> He lays his Triumph at his Idol's feet,
> When lo!—the Disc its destiny has missed,
> And hits the careless Player on the fist!
> He lifts his martyred digits to his lips,
> A flying Kiss consoles his Finger-tips.
> How canst thou, Ingrate, of thy luck complain?
> A smile o'erpays thee for the trifling pain.'

It was this piece of description (worthy of Virgil) which raised the question whether Gourdon had not surpassed Delille. The matter-of-fact Brunet objected to the word *disc*, which provided society with matter for discussion during the best part of a twelvemonth. But one evening when both sides had argued themselves red in the face, Dr. Gourdon, the man of science, completely crushed the *antidisc-ites*.

'The moon,' said he, 'styled a "disc" by the poets, is a globe.'

'How do you know?' retorted Brunet. 'We have never seen the other side of it.'

The third canto contained the inevitable anecdote, a story of a famous minister of Louis XVI., which everybody knows by heart; but, to quote the formula hallowed by constant use in the *Débats* between 1810 and 1814, 'it had borrowed novel graces from poesy and from the charm which the author had infused into his verse.'

The fourth canto, which summed up the work, con-

cluded with the following audacious lines of the kind written for private circulation from 1810 to 1814; lines which first saw the light in 1824, after the death of Napoleon :—

> 'Thus have I dared to sing 'mid War's alarms,
> Ah! would that Monarchs bore no other Arms,
> Ah! would that Nations in their Hours of ease
> Beguiled the time with Pleasures such as these!
> To Burgundy, too long, alas! forlorn,
> Saturn's and Rhea's days again were born.'

These elegant verses were incorporated in the first and only edition, the *editio princeps*, which issued from the press of Bournier, the printer at Ville-aux-Fayes.

One hundred subscribers, by an offering of three francs apiece, insured immortality to the poem, and established a dangerous precedent; and this was the more handsome of them, for that every one of the subscribers had heard every line of the verses a hundred times.

Mme. Soudry had but recently suppressed the cup-and-ball which used to lie on a console table in her drawing-room, a pretext for frequent quotations; she found out at last that she had a rival in the toy.

As for the poet himself, who bragged of his works in manuscript, it will be a sufficient description of him to record the way in which he announced to the 'best society' of Soulanges that a rival poet had appeared.

'Have you heard the strange news?' he had said (two years before the story begins). 'There is *another* poet in Burgundy.—Yes,' he went on, seeing the astonishment expressed in all faces, 'he comes from Mâcon. But you would never imagine what he is at work upon. He is putting the clouds into rhyme——'

'They did very well, left *blank*,' said Guerbet the punster.

'It is the queerest rigmarole! Lakes and stars and billows! Not a single rational image, not a trace of didactic intention; he is ignorant of the very sources of

poetry. He calls the sky by its proper name; he calls the moon, the moon, plump and plain, instead of calling it the "orb of night!" See what lengths you may go by straining after originality!' cried Gourdon dolorously. 'Poor young fellow! A born Burgundian, and he takes to singing the praise of water, it makes you sorry to see it! If he had but come and consulted *me*, I would have given him the finest subject in the world, a poem on wine—*The Bacchiad*—which I myself feel too old to undertake now.

The great poet[1] is still ignorant of his greatest triumph (due, it is true, to his Burgundian extraction). He was once the talk of Soulanges, where the very names of the modern *Pléiade* were unknown.

Scores of Gourdons lived and sang under the Empire, which some have blamed, forsooth, for the neglect of letters! Turn to your booksellers' catalogues, and behold poem after poem on the Turning-lathe, the Game of Draughts, Backgammon, Geography, Typography, Comedy, and what not, to say nothing of masterpieces so much cried up as Delille on Pity, Imagination, and Conversation, or Berchoux on Gastronomy, *Dansomanie*, and the like. Very probably in another fifty years readers will laugh at our thousand and one poems, modelled on the *Méditations* and *Orientales*. Who can foresee the changes of taste, the caprices of fashion, the transformations of man's mind? Each generation sweeps away all before it, even down to the traces of the idols which it finds upon its way; each generation sets up new gods to be worshipped and thrown down in turn by the next.

Sarcus, a nice, little, dappled-grey, elderly man, divided his time between Themis and Flora—which is to say, between the Court and his hothouse. For the past twelve years he had been meditating a book to be entitled 'The History of the Institution of Justices of the Peace.' The political and judicial aspects of these

[1] Lamartine.

functionaries, he was wont to observe, had already undergone several changes. Justices of the peace existed in virtue of the Code of Brumaire of the year IV.; but an office so important, so invaluable to the country, had lost its *prestige*, because the emoluments attached to an appointment which ought to be made for life were out of all proportion to the dignity of the office. It was laid to Sarcus's charge that he was a Freethinker; and he was considered to be the politician of the set, which, in plain language, as you will guess, means that he was the most tiresome person in it. He was said 'to talk like a book.' Gaubertin promised him the Cross of the Legion of Honour, but postponed fulfilment until the day when he (Gaubertin) should succeed Leclercq and take his seat in the Centre Left.

Guerbet, the local wit and receiver of taxes, was a stout, heavy man, with a butter face, a false *toupet*, and gold rings in the ears, which lived in a state of continual friction with his shirt collar. Guerbet dabbled in pomology. He prided himself on the possession of the finest fruit-trees in the district; he forced early vegetables, which appeared about a month after their advent in Paris, and grew the most tropical products in his hotbeds; pine-apples, to wit, and nectarines, and green peas; and when a pottle of strawberries was sold at ten sous in Paris, he would bring Mme. Soudry a handful with no little pride.

In M. Vermut the druggist Soulanges possessed a chemist who had a little more right to his title than Sarcus the statesman, or Lupin the singer, or Gourdon senior, the man of science, or his brother the poet. Yet the best society of Soulanges held Vermut rather cheap, and beyond that society he was not known at all. Perhaps the circle felt instinctively the real superiority of the thinker among them who never said a word, and listened to nonsense with a satirical smile; so they threw doubts on his learning, and questioned it

sotto voce. Outside the circle no one troubled their heads about it.

Vermut was the butt of Mme. Soudry's salon. No society is complete without a victim; there must be somebody to compassionate, and banter, and patronise, and scorn. In the first place, Vermut, with his head full of scientific problems, used to come to the house with his cravat untied and his waistcoat unfastened, and wore a green jacket, usually stained. Furthermore, he was a fair mark for jokes on account of a countenance so babyish that old Guerbet used to say that he had taken it from his patients. In places behind the times like Soulanges, country apothecaries are still employed as they used to be in the days when Pourceaugnac fell a victim to a practical joke, and these respectable practitioners, the better to establish their calling, demand an indemnity of displacement.

The little man, endowed with the patience of a chemist, could not 'enjoy' his wife, to use the provincialism which signifies the abolition of the marital rule. Mme. Vermut, a charming lively woman, a woman of spirit moreover, who could lose two whole francs at cards without a word, railed at her spouse, pursued him with epigrams, and held him up for an idiot only fit to distil dulness. She was one of those women whose mission it is to keep a little town lively; she was the salt of this corner of the earth, kitchen salt, it is true, but what salt it was! She indulged in boisterous jokes, but these were overlooked. She thought nothing of telling M. Taupin, a white-haired man of seventy, to 'shut up, monkey!'

The miller of Soulanges had fifty thousand francs a year and an only daughter, whom Lupin had in his mind for Amaury, for he had given up all hope by this time of Mlle. Gaubertin, and President Gaubertin thought of the same girl for his own son, the registrar of mortgages. Here again interests clashed. This miller, a Sarcus-

Taupin, was the Nucingen of the town. He was said to have three million francs, but he would not join any combination. He thought of nothing but his flour-mill, and of how to get all the trade into his own hands, and was chiefly remarkable for the signal absence of courtesy or civility in his manner.

Old Guerbet, the brother of the postmaster at Conches, had about ten thousand francs a year of his own besides his professional income. The Gourdons were well-to-do men. The doctor had married the only daughter of the very old M. Gendrin-Vattebled, Crown Agent of Woods and Forests, who could not be expected to last much longer; while the registrar had wedded the Abbé Taupin's niece and sole heiress. The Abbé Taupin, curé of Soulanges, was a fat priest, ensconced in his living like a rat in a cheese.

The pliant ecclesiastic was very popular in Soulanges; he was quite at home in the best society, kindly and good-natured with the 'second-rate,' and apostolic with the unfortunate. Cousin to the miller, and related to both the Sarcus families, he belonged to the district, and was part of the system of Mediocracy. Taupin was thrifty, never dined at home, went to weddings and came away before the dancing began, and never meddled with politics; he demanded and obtained outward conformity to the requirements of religion, urging his pleas 'in my professional capacity.' And he was allowed to have his way. 'We have a good curé,' people used to say of him. The Bishop, who knew Soulanges well, was not deceived as to the merit of the ecclesiastic; but it was something to find a man who could induce such a town to accept the forms of religion, a man who could fill the church of a Sunday and preach a sermon to a slumbering congregation.

The Gourdons' ladies—for at Soulanges, as in Dresden and some other German capitals, those who move in the best society greet each other with the inquiry, 'How is

your lady?' and people say, 'He was not there with his lady,' or 'I saw his lady and the young ladies.' A Parisian who should say 'his wife' or 'womenkind' would create a sensation, and be set down for a man of the worst style. At Soulanges, as at Geneva, Dresden, and Brussels, these words are never used; Brussels shopkeepers may put 'wife of such an one' above their shop doors, but at Soulanges 'your good lady,' is the only permissible formula. To resume—the Gourdons' ladies can only be compared to the luckless supernumeraries of second-rate theatres known to Parisian audiences, who frequently take the *artistes* for a laughing stock; it will suffice to say that they belonged to the order of 'nice little things,' and their portraits will be complete, for the most unlettered bourgeois can look about him and find examples of these necessary beings.

It is scarcely worth while to remark that Guerbet understood finance admirably well, and that Soudry would have made a minister of war, for every worthy townsman was equipped with the imaginary speciality necessary to the existence of a provincial; and not only so, each one was free to cultivate his own private plot in the domain of human vanity without fear of rivalry or disturbance from his neighbour.

If Cuvier, travelling *incognito*, had passed through the town, the best society of Soulanges would have felt convinced that his knowledge was a mere trifle compared with Dr. Gourdon's scientific attainments. Nourrit and his 'fine thread of voice,' as the notary called it with patronising indulgence, would have been thought scarce worthy to accompany the nightingale of Soulanges; and as for the versifier whose works were just passing through Bournier's press, it was incredible that a poet of equal merit should be found in Paris now that Delille was dead.

This provincial bourgeoisie, in its sleek self-satisfaction, could take precedence of all social superiority. Only those who have spent some portion of their lives in

a small country town of this kind can form any idea of the exceeding complacency which overspread the countenances of these folk who took themselves for the cœliac plexus of France. Gifted as they were with incredible perverse ingenuity, they had decided in their wisdom that one of the heroes of Essling was a coward, Mme. de Montcornet a woman of scandalous life, and the Abbé Brossette a petty intriguer, and within a fortnight of the purchase of the Aigues they discovered the General's origin, and dubbed him the 'Upholsterer.'

If Rigou, Soudry, and Gaubertin had all of them lived at Ville-aux-Fayes, there would have been a quarrel; their pretensions must inevitably have come into collision; but Fate ordained that the Lucullus of Blangy should feel that solitude was a necessity if he was to combine usury and sensuality in peace; while Mme. Soudry had sense enough to see that she could only reign in such a place as Soulanges, and Gaubertin found Ville-aux-Fayes a central position for his business. Those who find amusement in the study of social intricacies will admit that Montcornet had a run of ill luck when he fell among such foes, all living sufficiently far apart to revolve in their separate spheres of power and vanity. The malignant planets were but ten times the more potent for mischief because they never crossed each other's paths.

Yet, though the worthy Soulangeois were proud of their leisured lives, and regarded their society as distinctly more agreeable than that of Ville-aux-Fayes, repeating with ludicrous pomposity that 'Soulanges is the place for pleasure and society' (a saying current in the valley), it would scarcely be prudent to suppose that Ville-aux-Fayes admitted this supremacy. The Gaubertin salon laughed *in petto* at the Soudry salon. Gaubertin would say, 'Ours is a busy town, a great business place, and some of us are fools enough to plague ourselves with money-making,' and from his manner it was easy to discern a slight antagonism between the earth and the

moon. The moon believed that she was useful to the earth, and the earth controlled the moon.

Both earth and moon lived, however, on terms of the closest intimacy. At Carnival-tide the best society of Soulanges went in a body to the four dances given in turn by Gaubertin, Gendrin, Leclercq, and Soudry junior, the public prosecutor. Every Sunday the public prosecutor and his wife, with M., Mme., and Mlle. Élise Gaubertin, came over to Soulanges to dine with the Soudrys. When the sub-prefect was invited, and the postmaster, Guerbet from Conches, came to take pot-luck, Soulanges beheld the spectacle of four official carriages stopping the way before the Soudry mansion.

II

THE QUEEN'S DRAWING-ROOM

Rigou timed his arrival for half-past five, knowing that he should find every one at his post at that hour. The mayor, like everybody else in the town, dined at three o'clock, following the eighteenth century usage; so from five till nine in the evening the Soulanges notables exchanged news, delivered political speeches, commented on all the gossip of the valley, and discussed the doings of the folk at the Aigues. This last topic found them in conversation for an hour daily. Every one made a point of learning something on that head, and it was well known besides that to bring news of the Aigues was a way of recommending yourself to your host and hostess.

After this indispensable review of things in general, the company betook themselves to boston, the only game which the queen could play. The stout old Guerbet would mimic Madame Isaure (Gaubertin's wife), ridicul-

ing her finical airs, her thin voice, prim mouth, and missish manners; the Curé Taupin would retail some bit of news from Ville-aux-Fayes; Mme. Soudry was saturated with fulsome compliments; and then came the final, 'We have had a delightful game of boston.'

Rigou was too selfish to take the trouble to come a distance of twelve kilometres to hear the trash talked in Mme. Soudry's drawing-room, and to see a monkey masquerading as an elderly woman. He was greatly the superior of the company by ability and education, and never showed himself in Soulanges save on the rare occasions when he went thither to consult his notary, Lupin. Rigou was not expected to be neighbourly; his habits and business occupations absolved him; and his health (he said) did not permit him to return at night along the road by the river, when 'the damp was rising' from the Thune.

The tall, gaunt usurer, moreover, overawed Mme. Soudry's drawing-room. Instinctively it was felt that in this man there was a tiger with claws of steel; that the malignance of a savage was combined with the wisdom implanted in the cloister and matured by the sun of gold, wisdom in which Gaubertin had never willingly trusted.

Urbain, Soudry's man, sitting on a bench under the dining-room windows, looked up and saw the little basket-chaise as it passed the *Café de la Paix*. He shaded his eyes to watch it, while he chatted with Socquard the saloon-keeper.

'That is old Rigou! The gate will have to be opened. You hold his horse, Socquard,' he said familiarly. Urbain had been in a cavalry regiment, and when he failed to obtain a transfer into the gendarmerie he took service with Soudry instead. He now went in to open the great gate into the courtyard.

The great Socquard, as you see, was paying an informal call; but so it is with many illustrious per-

sonages, they condescend to walk, and sneeze, and eat, and sleep for all the world like ordinary mortals.

Socquard was by birth a Hercules. He could carry eleven hundred-weight, he could break a man's back with one blow of his fist, twist an iron bar, or stop a cart with a horse harnessed to it. He was the Milo of Crotona of the valley, his fame spread all over the department, and absurd fables were told of him, as of most celebrities. It was said, for instance, in the Morvan that one day he picked up a poor woman, donkey, and bundles, and all, and carried her to market, that he had eaten an ox at a sitting, and drunk a quarter cask of wine in a day, and the like. Socquard, a short, thickset man with a placid countenance, was as meek as any maid, he was broad in the shoulders, and deep-chested; and though his lungs heaved like the bellows in a smithy, his voice was so thin and clear that it startled any one who heard it for the first time.

Like Tonsard, whose reputation for ferocity saved him the trouble of giving proof of it, like every man who is hedged about by a reputation of any kind, Socquard never displayed his triumphant powers, except at the particular request and prayer of his friends. Just now he held the horse's head while the public prosecutor's father-in-law dismounted and turned to apply himself to the flight of steps.

'All well at home, M. Rigou?' inquired the illustrious Socquard.

'Pretty well, old chap,' returned Rigou. 'And are Plissoud and Bonnébault, Viollet, and Amaury still the props of your establishment?'

This inquiry, apparently prompted by a good-natured interest, was no random question flung down by a superior to an inferior. When Rigou had nothing else to do, he thought over every trifle, and Fourchon had already pointed out that there was something suspicious

in an intimacy between Bonnébault, Plissoud, and Corporal Viollet.

For a few francs lost at play, Bonnébault was quite capable of selling the peasant's secrets to the corporal; or two or three extra bowls of punch might set him babbling when he did not know the importance of his maudlin utterances. But, on the other hand, the old otter-hunter's information might have been counselled by thirst, and Rigou would have paid no attention to it save for the mention of Plissoud. Plissoud was in a position which might inspire him with a notion of thwarting the Aigues conspiracy, if it were merely to make something for himself out of either side.

Plissoud, the clerk of the court, eked out his income with various unremunerative occupations; he was a life insurance agent (these companies having just been started in France), agent likewise for a society which insured against the chances of conscription; but an unfortunate predilection for billiards and spiced wine was the principal obstacle in his way to fortune. Like Fourchon, he cultivated the art of doing nothing, and waited for a problematical fortune to turn up. Plissoud hated the 'best society' of Soulanges profoundly, having measured its power, and Plissoud knew all the ins and outs of Gaubertin's bourgeois tyranny. He scoffed at the moneyed men of Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes, and represented the Opposition in a minority of one. As he had neither cash nor credit, he scarcely seemed to be formidable; and Brunet, only too glad to have so contemptible a rival, protected Plissoud for fear that he should sell his practice to some energetic young fellow like Bonnac, for instance, who would compel him to yield up an equal share of the business of the district.

'Business is all right, thanks to them,' answered Socquard, 'but my spiced wine is being imitated.'

'You ought to follow the matter up,' said Rigou sententiously.

'I might be led on too far,' said the saloon-keeper, innocent of any jocular intention.

'And do your customers get on well together?'

'There is a row now and again; but that is only natural when they play for money.'

All heads by this time were looking out of the drawing-room window; Soudry, seeing the father of his daughter-in-law, came out upon the steps to greet him.

'Well, *compère*,' cried the ex-sergeant, using the word in its old sense, 'is Annette ill that you vouchsafe your presence here of an evening?'

A survival of the gendarme in the mayor prompted him to go straight to the point.

'No,' said Rigou, touching the palm which Soudry held out with his own right forefinger; 'there is a row on, we will have a talk about it, for our children are concerned——'

Soudry, a fine-looking man, wore a blue suit as though he still belonged to the force, and a black stock and spurs to his boots. He took Rigou's arm and led him up to his imposing better-half.

The glass door opened on to the terrace, where the family party were walking up and down enjoying the summer evening. The imaginative reader who has read the previous sketch can picture the glory of the wonderful stretch of country below.

'It is a very long time since we last saw you, my dear Rigou,' said Mme. Soudry, taking Rigou's arm to walk out upon the terrace.

'I am so troubled with indigestion,' said the old money-lender. 'Just look at me, my colour is almost as high as yours.'

Rigou's appearance on the terrace was, as might be expected, the signal for a salvo of jovial greetings.

'Epicu-rigou! . . . I've found another name for you!' cried the receiver of taxes, holding out a hand, in which Rigou inserted a forefinger.

'Not bad! not bad!' said Sarcus, the little justice of the peace; 'he is a bit of a glutton is our lord of Blangy.'

'Lord of Blangy!' said Rigou bitterly; 'I have not been the cock of my village this long while.'

'That is not what the hens say, you rogue you!' said La Soudry, giving Rigou a playful little tap with her fan.

'Are we going on well, my dear sir?' asked the notary, bowing to his principal client.

'Pretty well,' said Rigou, and again he held out a forefinger for the lawyer to take.

This habit of Rigou's, which reduced a handshake to the chilliest of demonstrations, was enough in itself to depict the man's whole character to a stranger.

'Look for a corner where we can have a quiet talk,' said the monk, singling out Lupin and Mme. Soudry by a glance.

'Let us go back to the drawing-room,' said the queen of Soulanges. 'These gentlemen,' she added, indicating Dr. Gourdon and Guerbet, are having a discussion on the Q.T.'

Mme. Soudry had asked them what they were talking about, and old Guerbet, witty as ever, had replied that they were 'having a discussion on the Q.T.' Mme. Soudry took this for some scientific expression, and repeated the word with a pretentious air.

'What is the latest news of the Upholsterer?' asked Soudry, and sitting down beside his wife, he put his arm about her waist. Like most elderly women, La Soudry would forgive much for a public demonstration of affection.

'Why, he has gone to the prefecture to demand the enforcement of the penalties, and to ask for support,' said Rigou, lowering his voice to set an example of prudence.

'It will be the ruin of him,' said Lupin, rubbing his hands. 'There will be fighting!'

'Fighting!' repeated Soudry, 'that is as may be. If the prefect and the general, who are friends of his, send over a squadron of horse, there will be no fighting. With the gendarmes from Soulanges they might, at a pinch, get the best of it; but as for trying to stand against a charge of cavalry!——'

'Sibilet heard him say something still more dangerous, and that brings me here,' Rigou continued.

'Oh! my poor Sophie!' cried Mme. Soudry, taking a sentimental tone, 'into what hands the Aigues has fallen! This is what the Revolution has done for us; it has given silk epaulettes to low ruffians! Any one might have known that if you turn a bottle upside down the dregs will come to the top and spoil the wine.'

'He means to go to Paris and bring influence to bear on the Keeper of the Seals, so as to make sweeping changes in the Court here.'

'Ah!' said Lupin, 'then he has seen his danger.'

'If they give my son-in-law the appointment of *avocat général*, there is nothing to be said, and the Upholsterer will replace him by some Parisian of his own,' Rigou continued. 'If he asks for a seat in the Court for M. Gendrin, and has our examining magistrate Guerbet appointed to be president at Auxerre, he will knock down our ninepins!—He has the gendarmerie for him as it is; if he has the Court to boot, and has counsellors like the Abbé Brossette and Michaud at his side, we shall be nowhere; he might make things very unpleasant for us.'

'What! in these five years have you not managed to rid yourselves of the Abbé Brossette?' asked Lupin.

'You do not know him,' returned Rigou; 'he is as suspicious as a blackbird. That priest is not a man, he never looks at a woman; I cannot see that he has any passion, he is impregnable. Now the General's hot temper lays him open to attack. A man with a weakness is always the servant of his enemies when they can

use the handle he gives them. The really strong are those who can keep their vices well in hand, and do not suffer themselves to be mastered by them. The peasants are all right, everything is in working order, but so far we can do nothing against the Abbé. He is like Michaud. Such men are too good to live, the Almighty ought to take them to Himself——'

'We ought to find them servant girls who would put plenty of soap on their stairs,' said Mme. Soudry. Rigou gave the almost imperceptible start which a very crafty man makes when he learns a new stratagem.

'The Upholsterer has another weak side; he loves his wife. We might reach him in that way——'

'Let us see,' said Mme. Soudry. 'We must see first if he carries out his notions.'

'What?' cried Lupin; 'why, there is the rub!'

'Lupin,' said Rigou, taking an authoritative tone, 'just go to the prefecture and see the fair Mme. Sarcus this very evening. Arrange matters with her so that her husband shall tell her all that the Upholsterer said and did at the prefecture.'

'I should have to spend the night there,' returned Lupin.

'So much the better for Money-Sarcus, he will be the gainer,' remarked Rigou, 'and Mme. Sarcus is not exactly "out-of-date" yet.'

'Oh! M. Rigou,' simpered Mme. Soudry, 'is a woman ever "out-of-date"?'

'You are right as far as that one is concerned. She does not paint before the glass,' said Rigou. The exhibition of Mme. Soudry's antiquated charms always filled him with disgust.

Mme. Soudry, who firmly believed that she only wore a mere 'suspicion' of rouge, did not feel the sting of the epigram, and asked, 'Is it really possible that there are women who paint themselves?'

'As for you, Lupin,' Rigou continued, without taking

any notice of this artless speech, 'go to see friend Gaubertin to-morrow morning when you come back. Tell him that I and my crony here' (slapping Soudry on the thigh) 'shall come and eat a crust with him, and ask him for breakfast about noon. Let him know how things are going, so that each of us may turn his ideas over in his mind, for it is a question now of making an end of that accursed Upholsterer. As I was coming here to find you, I said to myself that we must get the Upholsterer into some mess or other, so that the Keeper of the Seals may laugh in his face when he asks for any changes in the Court at Ville-aux-Fayes——'

'Hurrah for the Church!' cried Lupin, slapping Rigou on the shoulder.

An idea struck Mme. Soudry at that very moment, an idea which could only have occurred to an opera girl's waiting-maid.

'If we could only attract the Upholsterer over to the Soulanges fair,' said she, 'and let loose some bewitchingly pretty girl upon him, he might perhaps take up with her, and we could make trouble between him with his wife; she could be told that the cabinetmaker's son had gone back to his old loves——'

'Ah! my beauty,' exclaimed Soudry, 'there is more sense in your head than in the whole prefecture of police at Paris!'

''Tis an idea which proves that Mme. Soudry is as much our queen by intelligence as by beauty,' said Lupin, and was rewarded by a grimace which was accepted without protest as a smile by the best society of Soulanges.

'It would be better yet,' said Rigou, who had remained thoughtful for some time, 'if the thing might be turned to a scandal.'

'To have him brought before a magistrate on a criminal charge!' cried Lupin. 'Oh, that would be fine!'

'How delightful!' said Soudry artlessly, 'to see, for instance, the Comte de Montcornet, Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour, Commander of the Order of St. Louis, and Lieutenant-General, in the Police Court on a charge of indecent——'

'He is too fond of his wife,' pronounced Lupin judiciously; 'he would never be made to go that length.'

'That is no hindrance,' said Rigou, 'but there is no girl in the district that I see who is fit to turn a saint into a sinner. I am looking out for one for my Abbé.'

'What do you say to the beautiful Gatienne Giboulard of Auxerre? Sarcus's son has lost his head over her,' suggested Lupin.

'She would be the very one,' said Rigou, 'only she is of no use for our purpose; she imagines that she has only to show herself to be admired; she is not wily enough. We want a minx with a head on her shoulders. . . . It is all one, she shall come.'

'Yes,' said Lupin, 'the more pretty girls he sees, the greater the chances.'

'It will be a very difficult matter to bring the Upholsterer over to the fair. And suppose that he comes, would he go to a dancing saloon like the Tivoli?' queried the ex-sergeant.

'The reason for not going does not hold good this year, dearie,' said Mme. Soudry.

'What reason, my beauty?' inquired her spouse.

'The Upholsterer wanted to marry Mlle. de Soulanges,' said Lupin; 'he was told that she was too young, and he took offence. That is the reason of the coolness between M. de Soulanges and M. de Montcornet, two old friends who both served in the Imperial Guard. They never see each other now. The Upholsterer did not feel inclined to meet them at the fair after that; but they are away from home this year.

As a rule, the Soulanges family spent July, August,

September, and October at their country house; but at this particular time the General was in command of the artillery in Spain, under the Duc d'Angoulême, and the Countess had accompanied her husband. At the siege of Cadiz the Count won, as all the world knows, the marshal's bâton which was given him in 1826.

So Montcornet's enemies might well believe that the Aigues would not always stand aloof at the Feast of Our Lady in August, and that it would be easy to induce the Count to come to the Tivoli.

'That is so!' added Lupin.—'Very well, Daddy,' he went on, turning to Rigou; 'it rests with you to manœuvre matters so that he comes to the fair, and we will bamboozle him nicely.'

The Soulanges fair on the 15th of August is one of the special attractions of the town. It is the most important fair for thirty leagues round, eclipsing even those held at the chief town of the department. Ville-aux-Fayes has no fair, for the day of its patron, Saint Sylvester, falls at the end of December.

In August, Soulanges is full of hawkers, and from the 12th to the 15th of August two parallel lines of stalls, wooden framework booths covered with canvas, enliven the usually empty market-place. The fair and festival, which last a fortnight, is as good as a harvest for the little place. It has the authority and prestige of a tradition. Peasants leave the communes, where they are nailed down by their toil, as old Fourchon put it, to go to the fair at Soulanges. The tempting display of wares and gauds heaped up in the booths on a fair green exercises a periodically renewed fascination over the minds of women and children and peasants all over France. It is the one great spectacle of the year.

So about the 12th of August, the mayor issued placards, countersigned Soudry, which were posted all about the district, in order to secure patronage for the salesmen, acrobats, and prodigies of all kinds, by announcing the

duration of the fair and enumerating its principal attractions. These placards, the subject of La Tonsard's inquiries, always ended with the same formula—

'*The Tivoli will be illuminated with coloured lamps.*'

The town of Soulanges had, in fact, adopted the flinty garden of the Tivoli as its public ballroom. Soulanges is built upon a rock, and almost all the soil for its gardens is imported.

The stony nature of the soil determines the peculiar flavour of the wine of the district, which is never met with except in the department. Soulanges produces a dry, white, liqueur-like wine, something like Madeira, Vouvray, or Johannisberg, those three *crus* with a strong family resemblance.

Socquard's ball made a prodigious impression on the native imagination, and the whole valley took a pride in its Tivoli. Those who had adventured so far away as Paris said that the Tivoli there was no finer, and only rather larger than the Tivoli of Soulanges; and as for Gaubertin, he boldly avowed that he preferred Socquard's ball to the ball at Paris.

'Let us think all these things over,' said Rigou. 'That Parisian newspaper editor will very soon weary of his amusements, and, by means of the servants, we might induce the whole party to come over. I will bear the matter in mind. Sibilet (though his credit is falling shockingly low) might put it into his master's head that this would be a way to curry favour with the multitude.'

'Just find out if the fair Countess is cruel to monsieur,' said Lupin, for Rigou's benefit. 'The trick we are to play off upon him at the Tivoli altogether depends on that.'

'That little woman is too much of a Parisienne not to know how to hold with the hare and run with the hounds,' said Mme. Soudry.

'Fourchon set his granddaughter Catherine Tonsard on Charles at the Aigues, the Upholsterer's second footman; we shall soon have a pair of ears in the rooms there,' said Rigou. 'Are you sure of the Abbé Taupin,' he added, as he saw the curé enter the room.

'He and the Abbé Moucheron are as much ours as Soudry is mine,' said Mme. Soudry, stroking her husband's chin with—'And you are not unhappy, are you, pet?'

'I am counting upon them for a scheme for involving that hypocrite Brossette in a mess,' said Rigou in a whisper, as he rose to his feet, 'but I am not sure that the fellow-feeling of the cloth will not be too strong for patriotism. You do not know how strong it is. I, for instance, am no fool, but I will not answer for myself if I fall ill. I shall make my peace with the Church no doubt.'

'Permit us to hope so,' said the curé, for whose benefit Rigou had raised his voice.

'Alas!' said Rigou, 'the blunder which I made by my marriage stands in the way of the reconciliation; I cannot murder Mme. Rigou.'

'Meanwhile, let us think of the Aigues,' said Mme. Soudry.

'Yes,' replied the Benedictine. 'Do you know, I think that our crony yonder at Ville-aux-Fayes is more than a match for us?—It is in my mind that Gaubertin means to have the Aigues to himself, and that he will take us in,' added Rigou.

On his way to Soulanges he had tapped various dark recesses of the plot with the bâton of prudence, and Gaubertin's portion of it rang hollow.

'Why, the Aigues is not to belong to one, but to all three of us,' cried Soudry; 'the house must be pulled down from top to bottom.'

'I should not be surprised to find a hoard of gold in it, which is all the more reason for pulling it down,' said Rigou cunningly.

'Pooh!'

'Yes. During the wars in old times, when the seigneurs were often besieged and surprised, they used to bury their money where they could find it again; and you know that the Marquis of Soulanges-Hautemer, in whom the younger branch expired, was one of the victims of the Biron conspiracy. The lands were confiscated and given to the Comtesse de Moret.'

'What a thing it is to know the history of France!' said Soudry. 'You are right. It is time that we came to an understanding with Gaubertin.'

'And if he tries to play fast and loose,' added Rigou, 'we will see about putting him in a stew.'

'He is rich enough to be honest,' remarked Lupin.

'I would answer for him as I would for myself; there is not an honester man in the kingdom,' said Mme. Soudry.

'Oh, we believe in his honesty,' Rigou began, 'but between friends there should be no oversights. By-the-by, I suspect somebody in Soulanges of trying to put a spoke in our wheel.'

'And whom?' inquired Soudry.

'Plissoud.'

'*Plissoud!*' cried Soudry, 'a poor stick! Brunet has him by the leg, and his wife keeps his head in the manger. You ask Lupin!'

'What can he do?' asked Lupin.

'He means to open Montcornet's eyes,' said Rigou; 'he means to use Montcornet's influence to get himself a place——'

'It would never bring him in as much as his wife does at Soulanges,' said Mme. Soudry.

'He tells his wife everything when he is drunk,' remarked Lupin; 'we should know in time.'

'The fair Mme. Plissoud has no secrets from *you*,' said Rigou in reply to this; 'we can be easy, never mind.'

'Besides,' said Mme. Soudry, 'she is as stupid as she

is handsome. I would not change places with her. If I were a man, I should prefer a woman who was plain, but clever, to a pretty woman who could not say "Two."'

The notary bit his lips. 'Oh! she can set other people saying "Three,"' said he.

'Coxcomb!' called Rigou, on his way to the door.

'Well,' said Soudry, as he went out with his crony, 'we shall meet again early to-morrow morning.'

'I will call for you.—Oh! by-the-by, Lupin,' he added, turning to the notary, who had left the room to order his horse, 'try to find out through Mme. Sarcus anything that our Upholsterer may contrive against us at the prefecture.'

'If she cannot find out, who will?' asked Lupin.

Rigou looked at Lupin with a knowing smile. 'Pardon me,' he said, 'they are such a lot of noodles in there that I was forgetting that there was one clever man among them.'

'Indeed, I wonder myself how it is that I have not grown rusty,' said Lupin artlessly.

'Is it true that Soudry has engaged a housemaid?'

'Why, yes,' said Lupin, 'a week ago. His worship the mayor had a mind to bring out his wife's merits by force of contrast with a little chit of a Burgundian peasant, the age of an old ox. How he manages with Mme. Soudry we cannot guess as yet, for he has the impudence to go very early to bed.'

'I will see into that to-morrow,' said the village Sardanapalus, forcing a smile, and with that the two profound schemers shook hands and parted.

Rigou, cautious soul, had no wish to be benighted on his way home, in spite of his new-born popularity. 'Get along, citizen!' he called to his horse, a joke which this son of the Revolution never forgot to cut at the expense of the Revolution. The bitterest reactionaries are always to be found among those raised on high by a popular upheaval.

'Old Rigou pays short visits,' said Gourdon the registrar, addressing Mme. Soudry.

'Short but sweet,' the lady replied.

'Like his life,' said the doctor, 'that man is immoderate in all things.'

'So much the better,' said Soudry. 'My son will come into his property the sooner.'

'Did he bring any news from the Aigues?' asked the curé.

'Yes, my dear Abbé,' said Mme. Soudry. 'Those people are the scourge of the countryside. How Mme. de Montcornet, who is at any rate a lady by birth, should not understand her interests better, I cannot conceive!'

'And yet they have a model before their eyes,' said the curé.

'Who can you mean?' simpered Mme. Soudry.

'The Soulanges——'

'Oh!—Yes,' added the queen, after a pause.

'Here am I, worse luck!' cried Mme. Vermut, as she came into the room, 'and without my neutralising agent; though Vermut is too neutral where I am concerned to be called an "agent" of any kind——'

Soudry, standing beside Guerbet, saw the basket-chaise stop before the Tivoli. 'What the devil is that blessed Rigou after?' he exclaimed. 'The old tiger-cat never takes a step in vain.'

'Blessed is just the word for a Benedictine,' said the stout receiver of taxes.

'He is going into the *Café de la Paix!*' cried Dr. Gourdon.

'Keep cool,' said his brother; 'he is distributing benedictions with closed fists, for you can hear them yelping inside at this distance.'

'That Café,' began the curé, 'is like the temple of Janus. It used to be called the *Café de la Guerre* in the time of the Emperor, and the place was as peaceful as

could be; the most respectable people used to go there for a friendly chat——'

'He calls that chatting!' broke in Sarcus. 'Ye gods! what conversation was it that produced a little Bournier!'

'——but since the house was called the *Café de la Paix*, in honour of the Bourbons, there is a brawl there every day,' pursued the Abbé, finishing the sentence which the justice took the liberty of interrupting. The curé's joke, like quotations from the *Bilboquéide*, came up very frequently.

'Which is as much as to say that Burgundy will always be the land of fisticuffs,' said Guerbet.

'That remark of yours is not so far wrong,' said the curé; 'it is pretty much the history of our country.'

'I do not know the history of France,' cried Soudry; 'but before I begin upon it, I should dearly like to know why Rigou went into the Café just now with Socquard.'

'Oh,' said the curé, 'it was on no charitable errand, you may rest assured of that.'

'It makes my flesh creep to look at that man,' said Mme. Vermut.

'He is so much to be feared,' the doctor said, 'that I should not feel safe even after he were dead if he had a grudge against me; he is just the man to get up out of his coffin to play you some ugly trick.'

'If there is any one on earth who can send the Upholsterer over here on the 15th and take him in some trap, Rigou is the man to do it,' said the mayor in his wife's ear.

'Especially if Gaubertin and you, dearie, have a hand in it too——' she began aloud.

'There! what was I saying just now,' exclaimed Guerbet, nudging M. Sarcus's elbow; 'he has picked up some pretty girl at Socquard's, and is putting her into his chaise——'

'Until——' put in the poet.

'There is one for you, whose speech is without ill intent,' cried Guerbet, interrupting him.

'You are wrong, gentlemen,' said Mme. Soudry. 'M. Rigou is thinking only of our interests; for, if I am not mistaken, that girl is one of Tonsard's daughters.'

'Laying in a stock of vipers, like an apothecary,' cried Guerbet.

'Any one would think, to hear you talk, that you had seen our apothecary, M. Vermut,' said Dr. Gourdon, indicating the little man as he crossed the market place.

'Poor old boy!' said the doctor's brother (suspected of distilling the volatile elixir of wit in the company of the apothecary's wife). 'Just see how he waddles along! . . . And he is supposed to be a scientific man!'

'But for him,' said the justice, 'it would be a puzzle to know what to do about post-mortems. He discovered the traces of poison in poor Pigeron's body so cleverly that the chemists from Paris said in the Court at Auxerre that they could not have done it better——'

'He found nothing at all,' said Soudry; 'but, as President Gendrin says, it is just as well that people should believe that poison is always found out.'

'Mme. Pigeron did wisely to leave Auxerre,' said Mme. Vermut. 'She is a weak-minded thing, and a wicked woman,' she added. 'As if there were not sure and harmless methods of keeping a husband in order without having recourse to drugs to get rid of the genus. I should very much like any man to say anything against my conduct. M. Vermut, worthy man, is scarcely ever in my way, and he has never been ill; and look at Mme. de Montcornet, how she goes on, in her chalets and hermitages and what not, with that journalist whom she brought from Paris at her own charges; she fondles him under the General's nose.'

'At her own charges?' cried Mme. Soudry. 'Is that a fact? If we could have proof of that, what a pretty subject for an anonymous letter to the General——'

'The General——' said Mme. Vermut, 'why, you would put a stop to nothing, the Upholsterer follows his calling.'

'What is that, dear?' inquired Mme. Soudry.

'Why—he furnishes the bedroom.'

'If Pigeron, poor fellow, instead of worrying his wife, had had the sense to do the same, he would be living yet,' said the registrar.

Mme. Soudry leant towards her neighbour, M. Guerbet of Conches, and administered to him one of the monkey's grimaces, inherited (as she imagined) from her late mistress; as if that mistress's smiles, like her silver-plate, were hers now by right of conquest. She redoubled her dose as she indicated Mme. Vermut, who was flirting with the poet of the *Bilboquéide*.

'How vulgar that woman is! What things she says, and what a way to behave! I do not know whether I can allow her to frequent our society any longer—especially when M. Gourdon the poet is here.'

'There is social morality summed up for you!' said the curé, who hitherto had not spoken. He had watched the whole scene, and none of it was lost upon him.

After this epigram, or rather this social satire, so pithy and so true that it went home to every one present, a game of boston was proposed.

Is not this a true picture of life in every latitude of the 'world,' as we agree to call it? The language is different, it is true, but are not the very same things, nor more nor less, said in the most richly gilded salons in Paris?

III

THE CAFÉ DE LA PAIX

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when Rigou passed by the *Café de la Paix*. The slanting rays of the sunset steeped the whole picturesque village in glorious red, and raised a riot of flaming colour in its window-panes, calling up the strangest and most improbable hues to contrast with the clear mirror surface of the lake.

The deep schemer, brooding over the plots that he was weaving, allowed his horse to go at a foot-pace; so that as he went slowly past the café, he heard his own name hurled at somebody in the course of one of the brawls which had, according to the Curé Taupin, produced a violent contrast between the name of the house and the chronic condition of strife within it.

It is necessary, for the sake of clearness, to enter into detail concerning the topography of this land of Cocagne. It lay in the angle formed by the road with the market-place; on this latter side it was bounded by the café itself, and along the side of the road by the famous Tivoli, which was intended to be the scene of one of the episodes in the conspiracy against Montcornet.

The house was built after the fashion of Rigou's parsonage. Three ground-floor windows looked upon the road, and in the front, a glass entrance door, with a window on either side of it, gave upon the market-place. There was another door at the side which gave admittance to the back-yard, by way of a narrow passage which separated the café from the next house, where Vallet, the Soulanges haberdasher, lived. The whole building, the green shutters only excepted, was painted a bright yellow. It was one of the few houses in the little town which could boast of

two stories and an attic floor, and had been so built for the following reasons.

In days before Ville-aux-Fayes attained its present amazing prosperity, and Soulanges was the principal place in the bailiwick, people who came on judicial business, or visitors for whom there was no room at the château, used to occupy the first-floor rooms, four apartments provided with a bed a-piece, and just sufficient necessaries to justify the appellation of 'furnished lodgings'; but for the past twenty-five years their only occupants had been acrobats, itinerant quacks, hawkers, and commercial travellers. At fair time the rooms let for four francs a day, and Socquard's four apartments brought him some three hundred francs, to say nothing of the increase of custom to his café.

The front of the house in the market-place was adorned with paintings specially designed for it. In the wall-space on either side of the door you beheld billiard cues intertwined with love-knots, and, above the loops of ribbon, steaming punch-bowls shaped like Greek drinking cups. The words CAFÉ DE LA PAIX blazed in yellow on a green background, with a pyramid of billiard-balls, red, white, and blue, at either end. The window-sashes, painted green, contained small squares of cheap glass.

Half a score of arbor vitæ shrubs in boxes (some one ought to rename the plants the 'Café tree') stood on either side the entrance door, a row of pretentious failures in vegetable life. The awnings, such as shopkeepers use in Paris and other great cities to screen their wares from the sun, were luxuries unknown in Soulanges; so each bottle in the window fulfilled the functions of a chemist's flask, for its contents were periodically recooked inside it. The lens-shaped bosses on the window panes caught the rays of the sun like burning glasses, set the wines, liqueurs, and syrups boiling, and stewed the plums and cherries in the brandy. So great was the

heat that Aglae, her father, and the waiter were driven of an afternoon to take refuge on the benches outside, under the feeble shadow of the luckless shrubs which Mlle. Socquard sprinkled with tepid water. There were days when all three—father, daughter, and waiter—lay stretched out like domestic animals, fast asleep.

The interior of the café had been papered in 1804 with scenes from the romance of *Paul et Virginie*, then in vogue. You beheld negroes cultivating coffee, which thus, at any rate, could be found on the wall-paper, if nowhere else, in an establishment where scarce a score of cups were called for in a month. Colonial products entered so little into ordinary life at Soulanges, that Socquard would have been at his wits' end if a stranger had asked for chocolate. The beverage would, however, have been forthcoming, and the customer would have been supplied with a nauseous brown broth produced by boiling one of the tablets sold for two sous by country grocers, an adulterated compound containing more starch, raw sugar, and pounded almonds than either genuine cocoa or sugar, and fabricated to ruin the trade in Spanish chocolate.

As to the coffee, Father Socquard simply boiled it in a large pipkin known in most households as 'the big brown pot.' He dropped in the mixture of powder and chicory, and, with intrepidity which a Parisian waiter might have envied, served up the decoction forthwith in an earthenware cup which had nothing to dread from a fall on the floor.

Sugar was still regarded in Soulanges with a reverence which dated from the days of the Empire; Aglaé Socquard courageously brought out four whole lumps of sugar as large as hazel nuts, with a cup of coffee for an itinerant hawker who had taken it into his head to call for that beverage of the man of letters.

There had been no change in the café since the day when all Soulanges flocked to admire the new bewitch-

ing wall decoration of gilt-framed mirrors alternating with brass hat-pegs, the counter painted to resemble mahogany, the reddish marble slab, with its gleaming plated vessels, and Argand lamps, stated by rumour to be Gaubertin's gift to that fine woman Mme. Socquard. Everything was besmeared with a soft, sticky compound, which can only be compared to the surface of old pictures which have lain forgotten in a lumber room.

Suspended by a chain from the ceiling hung an Argand lamp adorned with cut-glass drops, and provided with a globe-shaped oil reservoir which fed two separate wicks; the tables were painted to resemble marble, the seats upholstered with crimson Utrecht velvet,—all these things had contributed to make the reputation of the *Café de la Guerre*.

Thither, from 1802 till 1804, the townspeople of Soulanges repaired to play at dominoes or *brelan*, and to partake of glasses of liqueur or spiced wine, with brandied fruits and biscuits; for colonial produce was so dear that coffee, chocolate, and sugar were out of the question. Punch, like *bavaroise*, was a great delicacy, and compounded with some strange, ropy, sweetening substance not unlike treacle. The name has been lost, but the substance made the inventor's fortune.

This concise account will suffice to conjure up similar pictures in the memories of those who have travelled in the provinces; and others who have never left Paris can form some dim idea of the smoke-begrimed ceiling of the *Café de la Paix*, and its mirrors dimmed with myriads of dark specks to bear witness to the independence of the dipterous tribes of Burgundy.

Socquard's wife, a beauty, who in the matter of gallant adventures surpassed La Tonsard of the *Grand-I-Vert*, had once queened it there, dressed in the latest fashion. She affected the sultana's turban, for in the days of the Empire the 'sultana' enjoyed the vogue of the 'angel' of the present day.

The whole feminine world of the valley repaired to Soulanges to copy the beauty's turbans, poke-bonnets, furred caps, and *coiffures chinoises*. All the bigwigs of Soulanges were laid under contribution for these splendours. During the period of the short-waisted gowns which our mothers wore in the pride of their Imperial graces, Junie (for her name was Junie !) founded the house of Socquard ; her husband owed to her a vineyard, the house in which they lived, and the Tivoli. It was said that M. Lupin's father did reckless things for handsome Junie Socquard ; it was certain that she presented Gaubertin (his successor) with little Bournier.

These little matters, and the mysterious skill with which Socquard compounded his spiced wine, would be sufficient in themselves to account for the popularity of the café ; but there were, besides, plenty of contributory causes. Wine, and wine only, could be obtained at the *Grand-I-Vert* or at any of the little taverns in the valley, but at Socquard's café there were liqueurs and foreign wines and fruits in brandy. It was the only place between Conches and Ville-aux-Fayes, and for six leagues round, where you could play a game of billiards, and nowhere else would you find such admirable punch. So the valley rang almost daily with the fame of a café associated with every idea of the utmost refinement of luxury for these people whose sensibility resided in their stomachs rather than in their hearts. Add to these reasons yet another. All who frequented the place felt that it was a privilege to form an integral part of the Soulanges festival.

The *Café de la Paix* fulfilled the same end as the *Grand-I-Vert*, but in a town and in a sphere immediately above that of the tavern. It was a storehouse of poison, a half-way house for gossip between Ville-aux-Fayes and the valley. The *Grand-I-Vert* supplied the café with milk and cream, and Tonsard's daughters were

in constant communication with the latter establishment.

For Socquard the market square of Soulanges was an appurtenance of his café. Hercules-Socquard went from door to door, chatting with one and another, wearing for all costume a pair of trousers and an imperfectly buttoned waistcoat, after the manner of country bar-keepers. The folk with whom he chatted gave him warning if any one happened to enter his establishment, and he returned thither laggingly and, as it were, reluctant.

These details should suffice to convince the Parisian who has never stirred from Paris that it would be difficult —let us go further, and say that it would be impossible —to conceal the most trifling matter in the whole valley of the Avonne from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes. There is no breach of continuity in country districts. There are taverns like the *Grand-I-Vert* and *Café de la Paix* dotted about from place to place to catch and echo every sound. Matters which possess absolutely no interest for anybody, accomplished, to boot, in the strictest privacy, are bruited abroad by a sort of witchcraft. Gossip fulfils the functions of the electric telegraph, and by such apparatus evil tidings are borne prodigious distances in the twinkling of an eye.

Rigou checked his horse, alighted, and made the bridle fast to one of the door-posts at the Tivoli. Next he discovered a plausible pretext for listening to the dispute by seating himself between two of the windows, in such a position that if he stretched his neck a little, he could see the persons within and watch their movements, while at the same time he could hear the coarse words which shook the windows, and remain outside in perfect quiet.

'And if I were to tell old Rigou that your brother Nicholas has a grudge against La Péchina, and is always on the watch for her,' shouted a shrill voice, 'and that she will slip away under your seigneur's hands, he

would soon tear the tripes out of the lot of you such as you are; a pack of scoundrels at the *Grand-I-Vert*!'

'And if you play us such a trick, Aglaé,' yelled Marie Tonsard, 'I'll do that to you which you will never tell to any but the worms in your coffin. Don't you meddle in Nicholas's affairs, nor yet in mine with Bonnébault!'

Marie, urged by her grandmother, had followed Bonnébault on a spy's errand. Through the window at which Rigou had stationed himself, she had seen Bonnébault displaying his airs and graces for Mlle. Socquard, who felt bound to smile on a customer in return for his sufficiently agreeable compliments. That smile had brought on the tempestuous scene and a lightning flash of a revelation of no small value to Rigou.

'Well, Father Rigou, are *you* helping to wear out my premises?' It was Socquard's voice, and he clapped the money-lender on the shoulder.

The saloon-keeper had just returned from an outhouse at the end of the garden, whence such machinery as whirligigs, see-saws, and weighing machines were being brought out to be put in their places in the Tivoli for the delectation of the public. Socquard had come up noiselessly, for he was shod with the cheap yellow leather slippers which are sold in such quantities in the provinces.

'If you had fresh lemons, I would take a glass of lemonade,' said Rigou in answer; 'it is hot this evening.'

'But who is there squalling inside in such a way?' asked Socquard, and looking through the window, he beheld his daughter and Marie at close quarters.

'They are fighting for Bonnébault,' said Rigou, with a sardonic glance.

Socquard choked down a father's annoyance in the interests of the saloon-keeper. The saloon-keeper thought it the more prudent course to follow Rigou's

example and listen to the sounds from without; while the father in him yearned to enter and declare that Bonnébault, though full of estimable qualities as a customer, was absolutely worthless considered as the son-in-law of a Soulanges notable. Yet, Father Socquard had received but few offers of marriage for his daughter. The girl was twenty-two years old, and in height, weight, and size she rivalled Mme. Vermichel, whose activity was a standing marvel. A life behind a counter appeared to have developed a tendency to corpulence, which Aglaé inherited from her father.

'What the devil has got the girls?' inquired Socquard of his neighbour.

'Oh,' said the Benedictine, ''tis a devil which the Church has caught more often than any other.'

For all answer Socquard fell to examining the painted billiard cues on the wall between the windows. Patches of plaster had dropped away, till the beholder was puzzled to understand how they had once been bound together.

At that very moment Bonnébault issued from the billiard-room, cue in hand, and struck Marie smartly on the shoulder.

'You have made me miss my stroke,' he cried, 'but I shall not miss you, and I shall keep on until you clap a stopper on your gab.'

Socquard and Rigou thought it time to interfere. Both of them went inside, and immediately, with a sound as of the distant practice of a drum corps, there arose such a swarm of flies that the room was darkened. After the first alarm, however, the cloud of huge blue-bottles and bloodthirsty smaller brethren, with a gadfly or two among them, settled down again among a regiment of sticky-looking bottles on a triple row of shelves so black with specks that the paint beneath was quite invisible.

Marie was crying. To be beaten by the man she loves beneath the eyes of a rival is a humiliation which

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no woman will endure, no matter what her position in the social scale. Indeed, the lower her rank, the more violent the expression of her hatred. Marie Tonsard saw neither Socquard nor Rigou. She sank upon a seat in gloomy and ferocious silence. The old Benedictine eyed her curiously.

'Aglaé,' said Socquard, 'go and find a fresh lemon, and rinse a wineglass yourself.'

'You did wisely to send your daughter away,' said Rigou in a low voice; 'she might perhaps have been killed in another moment,' and he glanced significantly at Marie Tonsard's hand. She had caught up a stool, and was about to hurl it at Aglaé's head.

'Come, come! Marie,' said old Socquard, stepping in front of her, 'people do not come here to fling stools about, and if you were to break my glasses there would be a bill which you would not pay me in cow's milk——'

'Father Socquard, your daughter is a reptile. I am every bit as good as she is, do you hear! If you do not want Bonnébault for a son-in-law, it is time that you told him to go and play billiards somewhere else; he is losing five francs every minute——'

At the first outburst of a flood of words, which were shrieked aloud rather than spoken, Socquard took Marie by the waist and flung her out at the door in spite of her cries and struggles. He was not a moment too soon; Bonnébault came out of the billiard-room for the second time, his eyes ablaze.

'It shall not end like this!' screamed Marie Tonsard.

'You! bow yourself out!' yelled Bonnébault (Viollet had thrown his arms about him to prevent violence). 'Be off! or I will never speak to you nor look at you again.'

'*You!*' cried Marie, glancing at Bonnébault with fury in her eyes. 'Give me back my money first, and I will leave you to Mademoiselle Socquard, if she is rich enough to keep you——'

At this point Marie was frightened, for she saw that Hercules-Socquard could scarcely master Bonnébault, and with a tigress' spring she fled out into the road.

Rigou put Marie into his chaise to hide her from the furious Bonnébault, whose voice reached the Soudrys' house across the square; then, when Marie was hidden away, he returned for his glass of lemonade, examining meanwhile the group formed by Plissoud, Amaury, Viollet, and the waiter, who were all endeavouring to calm Bonnébault.

'Come, hussar! it is your turn,' said Amaury, a short, fair-haired, blear-eyed young man.

'And besides, she has gone away,' said Viollet.

If ever surprise was expressed on human countenance, it was visible in Plissoud's face when he discovered that the usurer of Blangy, sitting at one of the tables while the quarrel went on, was paying more attention to him, Plissoud, than to the two girls. The Clerk of the Court was thrown off his guard, his face wore the peculiar startled look that a man wears when he comes suddenly on another man against whom he is plotting. He went abruptly back to the billiard-room.

'Good day, Father Socquard,' said Rigou.

'I will bring your carriage round,' said Socquard; 'take your time.'

'How could one get to know what they say over their billiards?' said Rigou to himself; and just then he saw the waiter's face in the looking-glass.

The waiter was a man-of-all-work. He pruned Socquard's vines, swept out the café and billiard saloon, kept the garden in order, and watered the floor of the Tivoli, and all for the sum of sixty francs per annum. He never wore a jacket save on great occasions; his costume consisted of a pair of blue linen trousers, heavy shoes, and a striped velvet waistcoat, with the addition of a coarse homespun apron when on duty in the café or billiard-room. Those apron strings were his insignia

of office. Socquard hired the young fellow at the last fair; for in that valley, and all over Burgundy for that matter, servants are hired by the year, and come to the hiring fair exactly like horses.

'What is your name?' asked Rigou.

'Michel, at your service,' the lad answered.

'Does Daddy Fourchon come here now and again?'

'Two or three times a week with M. Vermichel. M. Vermichel gives me a few sous for letting him know when his wife is going to pounce in upon him.'

'He is a good man, is Daddy Fourchon; he has had some education, and has plenty of common-sense,' said Rigou, and he paid for his lemonade, and left the stale-smelling room as Socquard brought the chaise round to the door.

Rigou had just taken his seat when he saw the apothecary, and hailed him with, 'Hallo! M. Vermut!' Vermut looked up, and seeing Rigou, hastened towards him. Rigou stepped down again, and said in Vermut's ear, 'Do you know whether there is any irritant which can destroy the skin and induce disease—say a whitlow on the finger, for instance?'

'If M. Gourdon undertakes it, yes,' said the man of drugs.

'Vermut, not a word of this to any one, if you do not want us to fall out. But tell M. Gourdon about it, and tell him to come to see me, the day after to-morrow, and I will give him a forefinger to amputate—it will be rather a delicate job.'

And with that the ex-mayor stepped into his chaise beside Marie Tonsard, leaving the little apothecary dumbfounded.

'Well, little viper,' said Rigou, laying a hand on the girl's arm, after fastening the reins to a ring on the leather apron which covered them in. 'So you think you will keep Bonnébault by giving way to temper like this, do you? If you were wise, you would help on his

marriage with that big lump of stupidity, and then you could take your revenge.'

Marie could not help smiling as she answered, 'Oh! what a bad man you are! You are our master, and that is the truth.'

'Listen, Marie; I am a friend to the peasants, but I cannot have one of you come and put himself between my teeth and a mouthful of game. Your brother Nicolas, as Aglaé said, is waylaying La Péchina. It is not right, for the child is under my protection; she is down in my will for thirty thousand francs, and I mean her to make a good match. I know that Nicolas, with your sister Catherine to help him, all but killed the poor child this morning; you will see your brother and sister, tell them this—"If you let La Péchina alone, Father Rigou will save Nicolas from the conscription——"'

'You are the Devil himself,' cried Marie. 'People say that you have signed a compact with him. Is it possible?'

'Yes,' said Rigou, with gravity.

'They used to say so at "upsittings," but I did not believe them.'

'The Devil promised that no attempts upon my life should succeed; that I should never be robbed; that I should live for a hundred years without an illness; that I should succeed in everything that I undertook, and until the hour of my death I should be as young as a two-year cockerel——'

'As you certainly are,' said Marie. 'Well, then, it is *devilish* easy for you to save my brother from the army——'

'If he has a mind; for he will have to lose a finger, that is all,' said Rigou. 'I will tell him how.'

'Why, you are taking the upper road!' said Marie.

'I never go the other way of a night,' said the unfrocked monk.

'Because of the Crucifix?' queried Marie artlessly.

'That is just it, cunning girl!' returned the diabolical personage.

They were reaching a spot where the road lay in a hollow, a cutting through a furrow in the land, with a tolerably steep bank rising on either side such as you often see on French cross-country roads. On the hither side of this hollow the road forked to Cerneux and Ronquerolles, and in the angle of the fork a Crucifix stood. Any one standing on either bank might fire on his man to a certainty, for he could almost clap the muzzle in the passenger's face; and this was the more easy, since that the slopes behind were covered with vines, and there were chance-sown brambles and bushes on the bank which afforded cover. It may be guessed, therefore, why the usurer, with unfailing prudence, never went that way at night. The Thune flows round the base of the little hill which they call the Cross Green. Never was there a spot better adapted for murder and vengeance, for the Ronquerolles road runs down to the bridge over the Avonne by the hunting lodge, and the road to Cerneux crosses the high road in such a sort that the murderer would practically have a choice of four roads, and might fly in the direction of the Aigues, or Ville-aux-Fayes, or Ronquerolles, or Cerneux, and leave his pursuers in perplexity as to the way he had taken.

'I will set you down just outside the village,' said Rigou, when they came in sight of the first houses of Blangy.

'Because of Annette, you old coward!' cried Marie. 'Are you going to send that girl away soon? You have had her for three years. . . . What amuses me is that your old woman is so well. God avenges Himself.'

IV

THE TRIUMVIRATE OF VILLE-AUX-FAYES

THE prudent money-lender had made a law that his wife and Jean should sleep between sunset and sunrise, proving to them that the house would never be robbed while he himself sat up till midnight and lay late. Not only had he secured the house to himself between the hours of seven in the evening and five in the morning, but he accustomed both wife and man to respect his slumbers and those of the Hagar whose room lay beyond his own.

So the next morning about half-past six, Mme. Rigou came and knocked timidly at her husband's door. (With Jean's aid she had already looked after the poultry.) 'M. Rigou,' she said, 'you asked me to call you.'

The sound of the woman's voice, her bearing, and the way in which she obeyed an order, quaking all the while lest her very obedience should be taken amiss, showed the utter immolation of the poor creature to her ingenious petty tyrant and her affection for him.

'All right!' cried Rigou.

'Is Annette to be wakened too?'

'No. Let her sleep on. She has been up all night,' he answered gravely. The man was always serious even when he indulged in a joke. As a matter of fact, Annette had secretly opened the door to Sibilet, Fourchon, and Catherine Tonsard, all of whom came at different times between eleven and one o'clock that morning.

Ten minutes later Rigou came downstairs. He was dressed more carefully than usual, and greeted his wife with a 'Good morning, old woman,' which made her prouder than she would have been to see a Montcornet at her feet.

'Jean,' said Rigou, addressing the lay-brother, 'don't

leave the house. Don't let them rob me; you would lose more by it than I.'

It was by mingling kindness, and rebuffs, and hope, and hard words, in this way, that the learned egoist had broken in his three slaves to a dog-like fidelity and attachment.

Again Rigou took the upper road to avoid the Cross Green, and reached the market place of Soulanges about eight o'clock. He had just made the reins fast to the nearest post by the flight of steps, when a shutter was put back, and Soudry exhibited his countenance. Two small, black eyes gave a cunning expression to a face seamed by the smallpox.

'Let us begin by breaking a crust together,' he said, 'for we shall not get breakfast at Ville-aux-Fayes before one o'clock.'

He called under his breath to a damsel as young and pretty as Rigou's servant. The girl came noiselessly down the stairs; he bade her bring a piece of ham and some bread, and went himself to the cellar for wine.

For the thousandth time Rigou contemplated the parlour; the oak wainscot that rose to elbow height, the mouldings on the ceiling, the spacious handsomely painted cupboards, the neat stove, and the magnificent timepiece which once belonged to Mlle. Laguerre. The backs of the chairs were lyre-shaped; the woodwork painted white and varnished; the seats were of green morocco with gilded nail-heads. The massive mahogany table was covered with green oilcloth, scored with dark lines, and bound with green binding. The pains which Urbain bestowed on the polishing of the parquetry floor attested the fact that his mistress had herself been a domestic servant.

'Pshaw!' said Rigou to himself. 'This kind of thing costs too much. One can eat just as comfortably in my room at home, and I save the interest on the money laid out in this useless show.—'Why, where is Mme. Soudry?'

he inquired, as the mayor of Soulanges came in with a venerable bottle in his hand.

'She is asleep.'

'And you do not disturb her slumbers much,' said Rigou.

The old gendarme winked facetiously, and indicated the ham which the pretty Jeannette was bringing in.

'A nice morsel like that wakes you up,' he said, 'home cured! We only cut into it yesterday.'

'I would not have thought it of you, old chum; where did you pick her up?' asked the old monk, lowering his voice for Soudry's ear.

'Like the ham,' said the gendarme, with another wink, 'she has been in the house for a week.'

Jeannette still wore her night-cap, and had thrust her bare feet into her slippers. She wore a short petticoat, and the straps of her bodice were passed over her shoulders in peasant fashion; the crossed folds of a bandana handkerchief could not altogether hide her fresh and youthful charms, altogether she looked no less appetising than the ham vaunted by Soudry. She was plump and short. The mottled red of the bare arms that hung by her side, the large dimpled hands and short fingers shapely fashioned at the tips, all spoke of high health. Add to this a face of a thoroughly Burgundian type, ruddy, but white at the temples, ears, and throat; chestnut hair, eyes which turned slightly upwards at the outer corners; wide nostrils, a sensual mouth, and a trace of down upon the cheeks. With a lively expression tempered by a deceptive demureness, she was the very model of a roguish servant girl.

'Upon my word, Jeannette *is* like the ham,' declared Rigou. 'If I had not an Annette, I should like a Jeannette.'

'One is as good as the other,' said Soudry, 'for your Annette is fair, and soft, and delicate.—How is Mme. Rigou? Is she asleep?' Soudry resumed abruptly, to show Rigou that he understood the jest.

'She wakes at cock-crow,' said Rigou, 'but she goes to roost with the hens. I stay up myself and read the *Constitutionnel.* Evening and morning my wife lets me doze; she would not come into the room for the world——'

'Here it is just the other way,' put in Jeannette. 'The mistress sits up with company and plays at cards; there are sometimes fifteen of them in the drawing-room. The master goes off to bed at eight, and we get up at daybreak——'

'It looks different to you,' said Rigou, 'but it comes to the same thing in the end. Well, my dear, you come to me, and I will send Annette here. It will be the same thing, with a difference.'

'Old scoundrel,' said Soudry, 'you will make her blush!'

'Eh, gendarme! so you only want one horse in your stable? After all, every one takes his luck where he finds it.'

Jeannette, in obedience to her master's order, went to put out his clothes.

'You promised to marry her when your wife dies, I suppose?' asked Rigou.

'It is the only way at our age,' said Soudry.

'If the girls had ambition, it would be a short cut to widower's estate,' returned Rigou; 'more particularly, if Jeannette heard Mme. Soudry mention her way of soaping the stairs.'

Both husbands grew thoughtful at this. When Jeannette came to announce that all was in readiness, Soudry took her away with him, with a 'Come and help me,' which drew a smile from the unfrocked monk.

'There is a difference after all,' said he; 'I should not be afraid to leave him with Annette.'

Fifteen minutes after, Soudry, dressed in his best, stepped into the basket-chaise, and the pair went round by the lake on the way to Ville-aux-Fayes.

'And how about yonder château?' asked Rigou, as they caught a glimpse of the end of the manor-house. The stress which the old Jacobin gave to the word 'château' revealed the hatred of the great châteaux and great estates which small proprietors cherish in their souls.

'Why, I am sure, I hope it will stand for my lifetime,' said Soudry. 'The Comte de Soulanges was my general; he has done me a good turn; he managed my pension nicely, and then he allows Lupin to manage his estate, and Lupin's father made a fortune by managing it. There will be another to come after Lupin, and so long as there are Counts of Soulanges the place will be respected.—They are a good sort, they live and let live——'

'Ah! but the General has three children, and perhaps after his death they will not agree. Some day or other the sons and the son-in-law will sell the place, and that mine of lead and old iron will be sold to shopkeepers, whom we will contrive to squeeze.'

The château of Soulanges seemed to defy the unfrocked monk.

'Ah! yes, they used to build solidly in those times!' exclaimed Soudry. 'But M. de Soulanges is economising at this moment so as to entail the Soulanges estate; it is to go with the title——'

'Entails fall through,' said Rigou.

When the theme was exhausted, the pair fell to discussing the merits of their respective domestics in a Burgundian dialect, a trifle too broad to print. This never-failing topic lasted them till they reached Gaubertin's headquarters. Even the most impatient reader may perhaps feel sufficient curiosity on the subject of Ville-aux-Fayes to excuse a brief digression.

It is an odd-sounding word, but it is easily explained. It is a corruption of the Low Latin *villa-in-fago*, the manor in the woods. The name is sufficient to tell us that a forest formerly covered the delta of the Avonne which

flows five leagues away into the Yonne. Doubtless, it was a Frank who built a stronghold on the ridge which thereabouts makes a détour, and slopes gradually down into the strip of plain where Leclerq the deputy had bought an estate. The conqueror made a broad and long moat, and so entrenched himself in the delta. His was a strong position, and, for a feudal lord, an extremely convenient one for the collection of tolls and pontage on the bridges by which all wayfarers must pass, and grinding dues at the water-mills.

Such is the history of the first beginnings of Ville-aux-Fayes. Every feudal stronghold or religious settlement attracted residents about it, to form the nucleus of a town at a later day when the place was in a position to create or develop an industry, or to attract business. Jean Rouvet's invention of water-carriage for timber, requiring wharves in places suitable for intercepting the floating piles, was the making of Ville-aux-Fayes, then a mere village in comparison with Soulanges. Ville-aux-Fayes became the headquarters of the trade in the timber which was grown along both streams for a distance of twelve miles. Workmen flocked to Ville-aux-Fayes, for many hands were needed to build up the piles which the Yonne carries into the Seine, beside the salvage and recovery of 'stray' rafts. This working population supplied consumers of produce and stimulated trade. So it came to pass that Ville-aux-Fayes, which numbered scarce six hundred inhabitants at the end of the sixteenth century, in 1790 had a population of two thousand, which had doubled since Gaubertin came to the place. This is how it was brought about.

When the Legislative Assembly reconstituted the electoral divisions, Ville-aux-Fayes, on account of its geographical position, was selected as the seat of local government, to the exclusion of Soulanges. The position of Ville-aux-Fayes marked it out for a sub-prefecture, and a sub-prefecture entailed a Court of First Instance, and

the hierarchy of officials required by both institutions. With the increase of population in Paris there began to be an increase in the demand for fuel, prices rose, and Ville-aux-Fayes grew more important with the development of its trade. Gaubertin's second start in life had been determined by foresight; he felt sure that Paris would grow with the peace; and, in fact, the population increased by one-third between 1815 and 1825.

The configuration of Ville-aux-Fayes is determined by the lie of the land. Wharves line either side of the promontory. Above the town and below the hillside covered with the Forest of Soulanges, a bar has been made across the river to stop the floating timber; and here the outskirts of Ville-aux-Fayes begin. The lower town lies in the broadest part of the delta, along the brink of a sheet of water—a lake formed by the Avonne; but the upper town, consisting of some five hundred houses and gardens, is built on the higher ground which surrounds the promontory on three sides. This elevation, which was cleared of forest three centuries ago, looks down on the ever-changing picture of the Avonne lake, a sparkling surface covered with rafts built of timber taken from the great piles on the wharves at the water's edge. The streams loaded with floating wood, the picturesque waterfalls on the Avonne, which flows down from a higher level into the river, turning mill-wheels, and furnishing water-power to several factories on its way, all combine to form a busy scene, which is the more unusual on account of its background of green masses of forest; while the distant view up the valley of the Aigues stands out in glorious contrast to the sombre setting of the forest-clad hillsides above the town of Ville-aux-Fayes.

On the side of the valley opposite this vast curtain of trees the king's highway crosses the river by a bridge, and pursues its course till it reaches a row of poplars within a quarter of a league of Ville-aux-Fayes, where a little hamlet lies about a post-station situated there on a large

farm. The cross-road from Soulanges likewise curves away round to the bridge, where it joins the king's highway.

Gaubertin had built himself a house in the delta, with a view of making such a place that the lower town should be as handsome as the upper. It was a modern stone house, a single story high, with attics in the slate-covered roof, and the usual cast-iron balconies, Venetian blinds, much-painted window-sashes, and no ornament save a fretwork under the cornice. There was a spacious courtyard attached to the house, and an 'English garden' at the back, on the brink of the Avonne. The sub-prefecture could not be allowed to fall short of such elegance; and at the instance of the deputies, Messieurs Leclercq and Ronquerolles, it was transferred from its wretched temporary quarters to a brand new mansion built opposite Gaubertin's house. There also the town-hall was built, and quite recently a Palais de Justice had been erected for the houseless Court of First Instance; in fact, Ville-aux-Fayes owed a whole series of imposing modern edifices to the spirited example set by its mayor. A police-station completed the outline of the market square.

These changes, of which the inhabitants were not a little proud, were due to Gaubertin's influence. And he, but a few days before, had received the Cross of the Legion of Honour on the occasion of the approaching Birthday. In a mushroom town thus constituted there is no aristocracy and no old *noblesse*; and the citizens, proud of their independence, took up the quarrel of the peasants against a Count of the Empire who had gone over to the Bourbons. To their thinking, the real oppressors were the oppressed. The attitude of the trading town was so well known at the Home Office, that the sub-prefect had been specially chosen; he was a conciliatory spirit, educated by his uncle the famous des Lupeaulx; a man of compromises, familiar with the expedients by which men are

governed, the sort of man who is dubbed a time-server by puritanical politicians capable themselves of doing worse.

Gaubertin's house was adorned within with all the tasteless inventions of modern luxury. In the dining-room you beheld expensive paper-hangings with gilt borders, bronze chandeliers, mahogany furniture, chairs covered with crimson leather, astral lamps, round tables with marble tops, a white gilt-edged porcelain dessert service, and coloured lithographs; the drawing-room was upholstered in blue cashmere; the whole house looked dreary and commonplace to the last degree; but at Ville-aux-Fayes it was looked upon as the last extreme of the luxury of a Sardanapalus. Mme. Gaubertin played the part of a lady of fashion with great effect; she adopted sundry small affectations, and minced and simpered at forty-five in her quality of mayoress who has an established position and a little court of her own.

Do not the three houses belonging respectively to Rigou, Soudry, and Gaubertin reflect the country village, the little town, and the sub-prefecture to perfection for those who know France?

Gaubertin was neither a clever man nor a man of talent, but to all appearance he possessed both talent and cleverness. He owed the unfailing justice of his forecasts, like his cunning, to an excessive greed of gain. He coveted fortune, not for his wife's sake, not for his two daughters, nor for his son, nor for himself, nor yet for family considerations and the consequence which money brings; even when the quickening impulse of vengeance was set aside, he loved money-getting; he loved the game for its own sake, like Nucingen the banker, of whom it was said that he was always fingering the gold in both pockets at once.

The round of business was this man's whole life; and now that he was full to repletion, he worked as hard as though he wanted daily bread. All the schemes,

and trickery, and crafts of business as a fine art, all the clever strokes to be made, statements of accounts and receipts, all the clash of conflicting interests put Gaubertin in spirits, they set the blood in circulation, and distributed the bile equally over his system. He came and went, rode and drove, and went by boat, and attended sales and auctions in Paris; nothing escaped his attention, and he held countless threads in his hands without confusion.

Gaubertin was quick and decided in his movements and ideas; short, small, and compact, with his sharply cut nose, bright eyes, and erect ears; there was a suggestion of the hunting-dog about him. The perfectly round and sunburned face, from which the brown ears stood out (for he habitually wore a cap), was in perfect agreement with his character. His nose turned up at the end; the hard lips looked as though they could never unclose to speak a kindly word. A pair of sleek, bushy, black whiskers under the high-coloured cheek-bones disappeared in his stock. His frizzled iron-grey hair arranged itself naturally in a succession of rolls like an old-fashioned magistrate's wig; it looked as though it had been crimped by the scorching heat of the fire which burned within that dark head, and flashed in sparks from the little grey eyes. The wrinkles circling their rims were doubtless caused by screwing them up to gaze across country in full sunlight, a characteristic which completed his face. In person he was spare, muscular, and slight; he had the claw-like horny hands covered with hair peculiar to those who take a practical part in their work. His manner usually pleased those who dealt with him, for he could assume a deceptive gaiety; he could talk a great deal without saying anything which he did not intend to say; and he wrote but little, so that he might deny anything not in his favour which might escape him at unawares. He had an honest cashier to keep his books; men of Gaubertin's stamp

can always unearth an honest subordinate, and in their own interests they make of him their first dupe.

When Rigou's little basket-chaise appeared towards eight o'clock in the poplar avenue by the post-house near the bridge, Gaubertin in cap, jacket, and boots was already returning from his wharves. He quickened his pace at the sight of the chaise, for he rightly guessed that Rigou would only put himself out for 'the big business.'

'Good day, Daddy Nab; good day, stomach full of gall and wisdom,' said he, tapping either visitor on the chest. 'We are going to talk business, and we will talk glass in hand, by George, that is the way to do it.'

'You ought to grow fat at that trade,' said Rigou.

'I am working too hard; I do not keep indoors like the rest of you, who have the bad habit of staying at home like an old pensioner. Oh! you are well off, upon my word, you can do business in an easy-chair, sit at the table with your back to the fire—business comes to find you. Just come in, the house is yours, by George, so long as you stop in it.'

A man in a blue livery, faced with red, came to take the horse away to the stables in the yard.

Gaubertin left his guests in the garden for a moment, while he gave orders concerning breakfast. Then he came out to them.

'Well, my little wolves,' he said, rubbing his hands, 'the gendarmerie of Soulanges were on their way to Conches at daybreak this morning; they are about to arrest the woodstealers, no doubt. They are in a hurry, by George, they are!' (He looked at his watch.) 'By this time those fellows ought to be formally and duly arrested.'

'Probably they are,' said Rigou.

'Well, what do people say in the village, have they made up their minds?'

'What should they make up their minds to do?'

demanded Rigou. 'This is no concern of ours,' he added, giving Soudry a look.

'How is it no concern of yours? If our concerted measures force them to sell the Aigues, who will make five or six hundred thousand francs by it? Shall I, all by myself? I cannot fork out two millions, my purse is not long enough. I have three children to set up in life, and a wife who will not listen to reason on the score of expense. I want, and must have partners. Daddy Nab has the money ready, has he not? He has not a single mortgage which will not have expired; he has bonds for which I am answerable now for his money. I put myself down for eight hundred thousand francs, and my son the judge for two hundred thousand; we are counting on Daddy Nab for another two hundred thousand. How much do you mean to put in, reverend father?'

'The rest,' said Rigou coolly.

'The deuce! I should like to have my hand where you have your heart! And what are you going to do?'

'Why, I shall do as you do. Tell us your plan.'

'My own plan,' said Gaubertin, 'is to take double quantity, so as to sell half to those in Conches, Cerneux, and Blangy who want land. Soudry will have customers at Soulanges, and you have yours here. That is not the difficulty. How shall we arrange among ourselves? How shall we divide the big lots?'

'Dear me,' said Rigou, 'nothing more simple. Each will take what suits him best. I, in the first place, shall give nobody any trouble. I will take the woods with my son-in-law and Soudry. There has been so much damage done in them that they will not tempt you. We will leave you the rest for your share, faith! you will have your money's worth.'

'Will you sign an agreement to that effect?' asked Soudry.

'The agreement would be worth nothing,' Gaubertin

answered. 'Besides, you see that I am acting on the square; I am trusting implicitly to Rigou, for the purchase will be made in his name.'

'That is good enough for me,' said Rigou.

'I make one stipulation; I am to have the hunting-lodge and the outbuildings and fifty acres round about it. I will pay you for the land. I shall make the lodge into a country-house; it will be near my woods. Mme. Gaubertin—Mme. Isaure, as she chooses to be called—will make her "villa" of it, she says.'

'I have no objection,' said Rigou.

Gaubertin looked round on all sides; and having made quite certain that by no possibility could any one overhear them, he continued, 'Eh! now, between ourselves, do you think they are likely to play us some scurvy trick?'

'For instance?' asked Rigou, who was determined not to understand till Gaubertin should speak out.

'Why, suppose that one of the wildest of the lot, and a handy man with a gun into the bargain, should send a bullet whistling about the Count's ears—just by way of bluster?'

'The Count is the man to run up and collar him.'

'Michaud then?——'

'Michaud would keep it quiet; he would bide his time, and play the spy, and find out the man at last and those who had set him on.'

'You are right,' said Gaubertin. 'Thirty of them ought to rise at once. Some of them would be sent to the hulks. . . . After all, they would pick out the scamps, and we would rather be rid of them when they have served our turn. You have two or three good-for-nothings yonder—the Tonsards and Bonnébault, for instance——'

'Tonsard might do some queer stroke of work,' said Soudry; 'I know him. . . . We will egg him on further through Vaudoyer and Courtecuisse.'

'I have Courtecuisse,' said Rigou.

'And I have Vaudoyer in the hollow of my hand.'

'Let us be cautious!' said Rigou. 'Caution, above all things!'

'Come, your reverence, can it be that you imagine that there is any harm in talking about things that are going on about us? Is it we who are taking out warrants, locking people up, stealing wood, and gleaning? If the Count goes the right way to work, if he arranges with some farmer-general to exploit the Aigues, it will be good-bye to the baskets, the vintage is over. And you will lose more by it than I. . . . What we say is said between ourselves, and for our own benefit, for I certainly shall not say a word to Vaudoyer which I could not repeat before God and men. . . . But there is no harm in looking forward and profiting by events as they arise. The peasants hereabouts are a hotheaded race; the General's regulations and Michaud's severity and persecutions have driven them to the end of their patience. To-day they have made a mess of the business, and I will wager that there has been a scuffle with the gendarmerie.—Let us have breakfast.'

Mme. Gaubertin came out into the garden to find her guests. She was a somewhat pale-faced woman, with long ringlets drooping on either side of her face. She played the passionate-virtuous rôle, the woman who has never known love. She cultivated Platonic affection with the officials, and had for *cavaliere servente* the public prosecutor, her *patito*, as she called him. Mme. Gaubertin was addicted to caps with top-knots (though preferably she wore nothing to hide her hair), and overdid blue and pale rose-colour. She danced. At forty-five she had all the affectations of a young miss, in spite of large feet and alarming hands. She desired to be called Isaure, for amid her many oddities and absurdities she had the good taste to consider that the name of Gaubertin was unpresentable. Her eyes were pale, her hair of some undecided tint resembling dingy nankeen;

and, let it be added, a goodly number of young ladies took her for their model, stabbed the sky with their eyes, and posed as angels.

'Well, gentlemen,' she said, as she greeted them, 'I have strange news for you. The gendarmes have come back——'

'Have they brought any prisoners?'

'None whatever! The General asked for their pardon in advance—and it was granted in honour of the happy anniversary of the accession of our King.'

The three associates stared at each other.

'That big Cuirassier is cleverer than I thought him,' said Gaubertin. 'Let us sit down to table; we need consolation after this. After all, the game is not lost, it is only drawn out. It lies with you now, Rigou.'

Soudry and Rigou went home again out of spirits. None of them could think of any expedient for bringing about a catastrophe for their own advantage, so they trusted, as Gaubertin had suggested, that something might turn up.

There were certain Jacobins, in the early days of the Revolution, who were furious when the clemency of Louis XVI. defeated their purposes, and deliberately provoked the severity of the Court that they might find an excuse for bringing about the anarchy which meant both power and fortune for them. In the same manner, the Comte de Montcornet's formidable enemies put their last hope in the future rigorous methods of Michaud and the keepers. Gaubertin promised his support in general terms; he had no wish that his understanding with Sibilet should be known. Nothing can equal the discretion of a man of Gaubertin's stamp, unless, indeed, it is the discretion of an ex-gendarme or an unfrocked monk. In the hands of three such men, each steeped to the lips in cupidity and hatred, the plot could only end well, or, more properly speaking, ill.

V

HOW A VICTORY WAS WON WITHOUT A BLOW

MME. MICHAUD's fears had come of the second sight of passionate love. When a soul finds its all-in-all in another soul, it comprehends in the end the whole world in which that other dwells, and sees clearly in that atmosphere. Love brings to a woman the presentiments which, at a later day, become the second sight of motherhood. While the poor young wife fell into the habit of listening to the confused voices which reach us across the mysterious tracts of space, a scene in which her husband's life was actually threatened took place at the *Grand-I-Vert*.

Those who had been first astir that morning, before five o'clock, had seen the Soulanges gendarmerie go by on the way to Conches. The news spread quickly; and those interested were astonished to learn from the people who lived on the higher road that a detachment of gendarmerie, under the Lieutenant of Ville-aux-Fayes, had gone through the Forest of the Aigues. It happened to be a Monday, which in itself was a sufficient reason why the labourers should go to the wineshop, and it was likewise the eve of the anniversary of the return of the Bourbons; not that those who frequented that den of thieves, the *Grand-I-Vert*, required that 'august cause' (as it used to be called) to justify their presence in the tavern, though they would have urged the plea loudly enough if they had seen the shadow of an official of any sort or description.

The Tonsards, with Godain, who was in a manner one of the family, and Vaudoyer, and an old vinedresser named Laroche, were all assembled there. Laroche lived from hand to mouth; he was one of the Blangy delin-

quents who had been pressed into the service to cure the General of his taste for prosecutions. Blangy had likewise furnished three other men, twelve women, eight girls, and five boys; the women and children had husbands or parents to be responsible for them; but all of them were paupers; in fact, they composed the entire pauper population of Blangy. The vine-growers did well in 1823, and the large quantity of wine in 1826 was sure to mean another good year for them; the General had employed a good deal of labour, and had set money circulating in the neighbouring communes, so that it had been no easy task to find a hundred and twenty proletarians in Blangy, Conches, and Cerneux. It had, however, been done. Mothers and grandmothers who had not a sou of their own, like Granny Tonsard, had been put forward. This Laroche, the old labourer, possessed absolutely nothing; he was unlike Tonsard, he had no hot and vicious blood in his veins; it was a dumb, cold hatred that sustained him; he worked in sullen silence, detesting work, and unable to live without it. His features were hard, his expression repellent; his vigour had not failed him, despite his sixty years, but his back was weakened and bowed; he saw no future before him, he would have no bit of field to call his own, and he envied those who had land. So he ravaged the Forest of the Aigues without mercy, and delighted in doing wanton damage.

'Shall we let them take us away?' asked Laroche. 'After Conches, they will come to Blangy; this is my second offence, they will give me three months for it.'

'And what can you do against the gendarmerie, you old sot?' retorted Vaudoyer.

'Do? Could not we slash their horses' legs with our scythes? They would soon come down, their guns are not loaded, and when they found themselves outmatched by ten to one, they would soon be obliged to take themselves off. Suppose that the three villages rose, and two

or three gendarmes were killed, would they guillotine everybody? They would soon be obliged to give it up, as they did once before on the other side of Burgundy when they called the soldiers out for another affair like this. Bah! the soldiers went, and the peasants kept on cutting wood; they had done it for years and years, just as we have here.'

'Life for life,' said Vaudoyer; 'it would be better to kill just one of them; and to do it without running risks, so as to disgust those *arminacs* with the place.'

'Which of the brigands?' demanded Laroche.

'Michaud,' said Courtecuisse. 'Vaudoyer is right, right ten times over. You will see that when a keeper has been turned off into the dark, it will not be so easy to find others to stay in the sun and keep a lookout. It is not so much that they are there in the daytime, but they are there all night as well.—They are fiends, that they are!'

'Wherever you go,' said Granny Tonsard (and the old woman of seventy showed her parchment face, pitted with countless holes, pierced with two green slits of eyes, and garnished with locks of dingy white hair, which straggled out from beneath a red handkerchief), 'wherever you go, you come upon them, and they stop you. They look into your faggot, and if there is a single green branch in it, if there is so much as a miserable hazel switch, they will take away the faggot and take out a summons; they are as good as their word. Ah! the blackguards! there is no way of getting at them; and if they suspect you, they will soon make you undo your faggot. They are three curs yonder that are not worth two farthings; if they were put out of the way, it would not ruin France, at any rate.'

'Little Vatel has not so much harm in him,' said her daughter-in-law.

'*Him!*' said Laroche; 'he does his work like the rest of them. He will joke right enough and laugh with

you; but you stand none the better with him for that. He is the worst of the three; like M. Michaud, he has no heart for the poor people——'

'M. Michaud has a pretty wife, all the same,' said Nicolas Tonsard.

'She is with young,' said the old grandmother; 'but if things go on like this, there will be a queer christening when she calves.'

'Oh!' cried Marie Tonsard, 'it is impossible to joke with any of those *arminacs* of Parisians. They would take out a summons against you if it came to it, and no more care about you than if they had never joked——'

'So you have tried to come round them, have you?' said Courtecuisse.

'Lord love you!'

'Well,' said Tonsard, looking like a man who has made up his mind, 'they are men like others, we may get round them.'

'My word, no,' Marie went on, following out her thought, 'they do not laugh at all. What they give them, I do not know; for, after all, if that swaggerer at the hunting lodge is married, Steingel, and Vatel, and Gaillard are not; and there is nobody else—there is not a woman in the country who would have anything to say to them.'

'We shall see directly how things go at harvest and the vintage,' said Tonsard.

'They will not stop the gleaning,' said the grandmother.

'But I am not so sure of that,' replied her daughter-in-law. 'That Groison of theirs said plainly that M. le Maire was about to give notice that no one should glean without a pauper's certificate, and who will give them but he himself, and you may be sure that he will not give many. He is going to forbid us to go into the fields until the last sheaf is carted——'

'Why, he has you every way, that Cuirassier,' shouted Tonsard, transported with rage.

'I only heard this yesterday,' said his wife; 'I offered Groison a nip of brandy to get news out of him.'

'There is one that is well off!' cried Vaudoyer. 'They have built him a house, and found him a good wife, he has money coming in, he is dressed like a king. I myself was a rural policeman for twenty years, and I got nothing by it but colds.'

'Yes, he is well off,' said Godain; 'he has property——'

'And we stop here like the idiots we are!' cried Vaudoyer; 'let us go to Conches, at any rate, and see what is going on there; they have no more patience than the rest of us——'

'Let us go,' said Laroche, who was none too steady on his feet. 'If I do not put an end to one or two of them, I wish I may lose my name.'

'*You!*' said Tonsard, 'you would let them carry off the whole commune; but, for my own part, if any one were to lay a finger on the old woman, there is my gun, and it would not miss.'

'Well,' said Laroche, turning to Vaudoyer, 'if they take a single one from Conches, there will be a gendarme stretched out.'

'Daddy Laroche has said it!' cried Courtecuisse.

'He has said it,' said Vaudoyer, 'but he has not done it, and he will not do it. What good would you get by it unless you happen to want a drubbing? Life for life—it would be better to kill Michaud.'

While this scene took place, Catherine Tonsard had been standing sentinel at the tavern door, to warn the drinkers to be quiet if any one went by. In spite of their vinous gait, they dashed rather than went out of the door, and in their bellicose ardour took the road which lies for three-quarters of a mile under the park walls of the Aigues.

Conches was a thoroughly Burgundian hamlet, a collection of squalid-looking cottages, built some of brick and some of clay, along the high road which formed its single street. The hamlet looked fairly presentable when approached from the opposite side by the cross road from Ville-aux-Fayes, for a little river flowed between the high road and the Ronquerolles woods, which succeeded to those of the Aigues along the heights, and the view was enlivened by two or three houses rather picturesquely grouped. The church and parsonage house stood apart, a principal feature in the view from the adjacent Conches gate of the park.

The conspirators from the *Grand-I-Vert* caught sight of the gendarmerie through the trees in the square in front of the church, and sped along with redoubled haste. Even as they came up, three horsemen issued from the Conches gate of the park, and the peasants recognised the General, his servant, and Michaud the head-forester, who gallopped off towards the square. Tonsard and his party reached the spot a few minutes later.

The delinquents, male and female, had made no sort of resistance; there they stood, encircled by five gendarmes from Soulanges and fifteen from Ville-aux-Fayes. The whole village had turned out. The prisoners' children or mothers and fathers came and went, bringing them such things as they should need while they were in prison. The scene was curious enough; the population were evidently indignant, but they scarcely said a word, like people who had made up their minds that the thing must be. The women, old and young, were the only speakers. The children and the little girls were perched on piles of logs the better to see.

'Those hussars of the guillotine have chosen their time well! They have come on a holiday,' the women were saying.

'So you let them take away your husband like that, do you? What will become of you during the next

three months, the three best in the whole year, when wages are high?'

'*They* are the real thieves!' retorted the woman, with a menacing glance at the gendarmes.

'What makes you squint at us in that way?' asked the quartermaster. 'You may be sure of this, that if you indulge yourself in insults, it will not take long to settle your business.'

'I didn't say anything,' the woman hastily remarked, with a meek and piteous countenance.

'I might make you repent of some words that I overheard just now.'

'Come, children, be quiet,' said the mayor of Conches, the postmaster. 'The devil! the men must do as they are told!'

'That is true, it is all the doing of the master at the Aigues. But, patience!'

At that moment the General came out into the square; his arrival produced some murmurs, but he troubled himself very little about them. He went straight to the lieutenant of gendarmerie from Ville-aux-Fayes; a few words were spoken, and a paper handed over, then the officer turned to his men—

'Release your prisoners, the General has obtained their pardon from the King.'

While he spoke, General de Montcornet talked with the mayor of Conches in low tones, and after a moment the latter raised his voice and addressed the delinquents, who had looked to sleep that night in prison, and were all bewildered at finding themselves at liberty.

'You must thank M. le Comte, my friends,' he said; 'you owe the remission of the penalties to him, he went to Paris to ask pardon for you, and obtained it in honour of the anniversary of the King's return to France. . . . I hope that you will behave better in future towards the General, who has behaved so kindly towards you, and that you will respect his property henceforth. . . . Long live the King.'

And the peasants shouted, 'Long live the King,' with enthusiasm, to avoid shouting, 'Long live the Count.'

This scene had been planned by the General in concert with the prefect and attorney-general with a deliberate purpose. While showing firmness to stimulate the local authorities and impress the minds of the country people, the peasants were to be treated gently; so delicate did these crises appear to be. And, indeed, if any resistance had been offered, the Government would have been placed in a very awkward position. As Laroche had said, it was impossible to send a whole commune to the guillotine.

The General had asked the mayor of Conches, the lieutenant, and the quartermaster to breakfast with him. The conspirators of Blangy stayed in the tavern at Conches. The released offenders were spending the money which would otherwise have supported them in prison on drink, and naturally the Blangy folk were asked to the 'wedding.' Country people call every rejoicing a 'wedding,' and they eat and drink and quarrel and fight and go home again drunk and disabled, and this is called a 'wedding.'

The General took his guests, not by the Conches gate, whence he had issued, but by the forest, in order to show them the damage that had been done, so that they might judge of the importance of the question.

At noon, when Rigou was returning home to Blangy, the Count and Countess and their guests were finishing breakfast in the splendid room described in Blondet's letter to Nathan, the room on which Bouret's luxurious tastes had left its impress.

'It would be a great pity to give up such a place,' said the lieutenant. He had been over the Aigues, and had seen it all for the first time; and now, looking about him over the rim of a glass of champagne, he observed the admirable series of unclad nymphs who supported the ceiling.

'Wherefore we shall defend ourselves to the death,' said Blondet.

The lieutenant gave his quartermaster a glance which seemed to recommend silence to that officer. 'Suppose that I say that the General's enemies are not all among the fields,' he began.

The gallant lieutenant was softened by the splendid breakfast, the magnificent plate, the imperial luxury which had replaced the luxury of the opera girl; and Blondet's wit had been as stimulating as the soldierly bumpers which they had drained.

'How is it that I have enemies?' asked the astonished General.

'So kind as he is,' added the Countess.

'He and our mayor, M. Gaubertin, parted in anger, and, for the sake of a quiet life, he should be reconciled with him.'

'With *him!*' cried the Count; 'then you do not know that he was my steward, and a dishonest scamp?'

'He is not a scamp now,' said the lieutenant; 'he is the mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes.'

'Our lieutenant is a clever man,' said Blondet; 'it is plain that a mayor is by nature honest.'

The lieutenant, seeing from the Count's remark that it was impossible to open his eyes, said no more on that subject.

VI

THE FOREST AND THE HARVEST

THE scene at Conches had a good effect; the Count's faithful keepers saw that no green wood was taken out of the forest of the Aigues; but the forest had been so thoroughly exploited by the peasants for twenty years,

that there was nothing but young growth left, and, dead wood being scarce, they were busy killing the trees against the coming winter. The means used were extremely simple, and could only be discovered some time afterwards.

Tonsard sent his mother into the forest, the keeper used to see her come in, and knowing the way by which she would go out, would lie in wait to inspect her faggot. As a matter of fact, he always found nothing in it but sear brushwood, fallen branches, and withered and broken boughs, and Granny Tonsard used to groan and pity herself because at her age she had to go so far to pick up such a miserable bundle of sticks. But she did not say that she had been in the dense thickets, where the saplings grew, grubbing at the base of the young trees, and stripping off a ring of bark close to the ground, covering up her work with moss and leaves, and leaving all apparently as it was before. It was impossible to detect this ring-shaped incision, made not with a billhook, but by tearing away the bark in such a manner that the damage seemed to be the work of the cockchafer grub, a wood-gnawing insect pest known by the various names of 'the Turk,' the wood-worm, and wood-maggot in different parts of the country. This grub lives upon bark, lodging itself between the bark and the wood to gnaw its way underneath. If the tree is large enough, and the grub fails to make the circuit before its transformation into the chrysalis stage, it is safe, for so long as the bark is not ringed round, the tree can grow. To show the intimate connection between entomology, agriculture, horticulture, and vegetable production generally, it is sufficient to point out that Latreille, the Comte Dejean, and Klug of Berlin, Géné of Turin, and other great naturalists have discovered that nearly all insects feed on vegetable growths. There are twenty-seven thousand species of plant-eating coleoptera in M. Dejean's published cata-

logue; and in spite of the eager research of entomologists of all countries, there are still an enormous number of species unidentified in their triple transformations. Not only has every wild plant its particular insect pest, but every vegetable product, however modified by human industry, has its special insect. The hemp and flax which clothes human creatures and goes to the making of ropes to hang them, after covering the backs of an army, is transformed into writing-paper, and those who read or write much are familiar with the habits of the 'silver fish,' an insect marvellous in its appearance and genesis, which passes through its mysterious transformations in a ream of carefully kept white paper. You behold the creature skip nimbly in his splendid raiment, glittering like talc or spar; it is a flying 'silver fish.'

The wood-maggot is the despair of the cultivator. In its earlier stages it hides below ground, safe out of reach of administrative circulars; so that the authorities can only order a series of Sicilian vespers when it emerges as a full-grown cockchafer. If people knew the whole extent of the damage done by cockchafers and caterpillars, they would pay more attention to the prefect's injunctions. Holland all but perished because the teredo burrowed in her dykes, and science has not yet discovered the final transformation of the teredo, nor the earlier metamorphoses of the cochineal insect. In all probability the ergot of rye is a seething insect population, though scientific genius can only discern slight movement in its particles.

So as the peasants waited for harvest and vintage some fifty old women imitated the work of the cockchafer grub at the foot of five or six hundred trees which should never bear leaves again and stand up, dead and stark, in the spring. All the trees were purposely chosen in out-of-the-way spots, so that the peasants might the better secure the spoil of dead branches. Who told them the secret? No one in so many words; but Courtecuisse

had complained one day at the tavern that an elm-tree in his garden was dying at the top; there was something the matter with the tree; and he, Courtecuisse, suspected that it was a wood-maggot, he knew well what a wood-maggot was, and he knew that when a tree had a wood-maggot in it, that tree was as good as dead. Then he showed his audience in the tavern how the maggot went round the tree.

The old women did their work of destruction as mysteriously and as deftly as pixies, urged on by the exasperating measures taken by the mayor of Blangy. Other mayors had received instructions to follow the example set them. The rural police made public proclamation that no one would be allowed to glean in cornfields or vineyards without a certificate from the mayor of each commune; the prefect sent down an example of the certificate required to the sub-prefecture, and the sub-prefect supplied the mayors with a pattern copy apiece. The great landowners of the district admired Montcornet's behaviour, and the prefect said that if other great personages would do likewise, and live on their estates, the results would be of the happiest; for such measures as these, added the prefect, ought to be taken all over the country; they should be uniformly adopted and modified by benevolence and such enlightened philanthropy as that of General de Montcornet.

And the General and the Countess, with the help of the Abbé Brossette, were, in fact, endeavouring to help the people. They had thought out their plans carefully; they desired to show in a practical and unmistakable fashion that those who were plundering them would do better for themselves by earning an honest livelihood. They gave out hemp to be spun, and paid for the work, and the Countess had the thread woven into hessian for kitchen cloths, dusters, and aprons, and shirts for the very poor. The Count undertook improvements, drawing all his labourers from the neighbouring communes. The

details were left to Sibilet, and the Abbé Brossette informed the Countess of cases of poverty, and brought them under her notice. Mme. de Montcornet held her Assizes of Mercy in the great hall above the steps. It was a beautiful vestibule, paved with marble red and white; an ornamental majolica stove stood in it, and the long benches were covered with red velvet.

Thither one morning before the harvest came old Granny Tonsard with her granddaughter Catherine; she had a terrible confession to make touching the honour of a poor but honest family. While she spoke, Catherine stood like a guilty thing, and then in her turn she told of her 'strait.' Nobody knew of it but her grandmother, she said; her mother would drive her out of the house; her father, a man of honour, would kill her. If she had but a thousand francs, there was a poor labourer named Godain who was willing to marry her; he knew all, and he loved her like a brother. He would buy a bit of waste land and build a cottage upon it. It was touching. The Countess promised to set aside a sum of money, the price of a sacrificed whim, for a marriage portion. The two happy marriages of Michaud and Groison had encouraged her in match-making; and besides, this wedding was to set a good example to the peasants, and a higher standard of conduct. So a marriage was arranged between Godain and Catherine by means of Mme. de Montcornet's money.

Another time it was Granny Bonnébault, a horrible old woman, who lived in a cabin between the Conches gate and the village, who came with a load of hanks of spun hemp.

'The Countess has worked miracles,' said the Abbé, full of hope for the moral improvement of these savages. 'That woman used to do a great deal of damage in your woods; but now, why should she go? She spins from morning to night; she is busy, and earning money.'

The country was quiet. Groison brought in satisfac-

tory reports, the wood-stealing seemed to be almost at an end; perhaps, indeed, a real transformation might have been wrought, but for Gaubertin's rancorous greed, but for the petty cabals of the 'best society' of Soulanges, but for Rigou's intrigues, which fanned the flames of hate and crime smouldering in the minds of the peasants of the valley.

The foresters, however, complained that they found many branches gashed with the billhook in the forest; evidently somebody intended to find dead wood for winter fuel. But their efforts to discover those persons were fruitless. The Count with Groison's assistance had given pauper's certificates to the thirty or forty who really needed them; but other communes had been less particular. The Count was determined that after his late clemency in the matter of the arrests at Conches, the regulations as to the harvest must be strictly enforced, for gleaning had degenerated into robbery. With the three farms which he had let on lease he did not concern himself; but he had half a dozen smaller farms which paid rent in kind on the system of division of produce between landlord and tenant, and on these he meant to take his stand. He had given notice that any one who should enter a field before the last sheaf had been carted away should be prosecuted; an order which interested no other farmer in the commune; for Rigou, who knew the country well, used to let his arable land in little plots and on short leases to men who reaped their own crops themselves; he stipulated that his rents should be paid in grain, the abuse of gleaning did not affect him. Nor did it affect the remaining farmers, for peasant proprietors let each other alone.

The Count had instructed Sibilet to see that his tenants cut their corn in succession, and to put all the harvesters to work at once on the same farm, so that it might be easier to keep a watch upon them. This plan had been suggested by Groison, who was to superintend

the influx of gleaners into every field. The Count went in person with Michaud to see it in operation.

Town-dwellers would never imagine what the gleaning means to country people; indeed, the French peasant's passion for gleaning is quite inexplicable, for women will leave well-paid work to pick up stray ears in the fields. The corn gleaned in this way appears to have peculiar virtue in it, and the provision thus made for the more substantial part of their daily food has an immense attraction for them. Mothers bring toddling children with their older girls and boys; the most decrepit old people drag themselves to the fields; and, as might be expected, those who are not really poor will feign poverty and go a-gleaning in rags.

The Count and Michaud had ridden out to watch the onslaught of the tattered crowd upon the first field of the first farm.

It was ten o'clock on a hot August morning, the cloudless sky above was blue as periwinkle blossoms, the earth was burning, the wheat fields blazed like flame, the sun beat down on the hard soil which reflected the heat up in waves to scorch the faces of the reapers who, with shirts wet with perspiration, toiled in silence, only stopping now and again to drink from their round, loaf-shaped stone water-bottles, cruses with two ears, and a rough spout stoppered by a peg of willow.

At the edge of the stubble-field, where the last sheaves were being piled on the waggons, stood a hundred human beings, who, in their wretchedness, surely left the most hideous conceptions of a Murillo or a Teniers far behind. Here were the most daring pictures of beggary, and faces such as a Callot, the poet of misery in its most fantastic phases, has drawn to the life. Here were the limbs of bronze, the bald heads, the strangely degraded tints, the tattered greasy rags—darned, patched, stained, discoloured, worn down to the bare threads. Here, in short, the painter's ideal of the trappings of misery

was overtopped, even as those faces, in their anxiety, greed, imbecility, idiocy, and savagery surpassed the immortal creations of the princes of colour, in that they possessed the immortal advantage of Nature over Art. There stood old crones, with red lashless eyelids, stretching out their turkey's throats like pointers putting up a partridge; there stood children mute as sentinels on guard, and little girls stamping with impatience like animals waiting to be let out to pasture; every characteristic of infancy and age was obliterated by a common frenzy of greed in all faces; all coveted their neighbour's goods, which long abuse had made their own. Their eyes glared, they made threatening gestures, but none of them spoke in the presence of the Count, the policeman, and the head-forester. The landowner, the farmer, the worker, and the pauper were all represented there, and the social problem behind the scene was outlined very clearly, for hunger had summoned those threatening figures. Every hard feature, every hollow in their faces was brought into relief by the sunlight which scorched their bare dusty feet; some of the children had no clothing but a ragged blouse, and their flaxen curls were full of bits of wood, straw, and hay, and here and there a woman held by the hand a mere baby which could scarcely toddle, to be put down presently to crawl along the furrows.

This dreadful picture was intolerable to an old soldier with a kind heart. The General spoke to Michaud.

'It hurts me to see them. If we did not know all that was involved in these measures, it would be impossible to persist.'

'If every landowner were to follow your example, General, and live on his estate, and do good as you are doing, I do not say that there would be no poor, for we have the poor always with us, but there would be no one who could not make an honest living.'

'The mayors of Conches, Cerneux, and Soulanges

have sent us their paupers,' said Groison, who had been verifying the certificates; 'they ought not to do that.'

'No,' said the Count, 'but our paupers will go to glean in their communes; it is enough for the present if they do not help themselves from the sheaves. We must take one step at a time,' and he went away.

'Did you hear that?' asked Granny Tonsard, turning to Bonnébault's mother. The Count happening to raise his voice a little over the last words, they reached the ears of one of the two old crones who were posted on the road by the edge of the field.

'Yes, that is not all; a tooth to-day, an ear to-morrow, if they could invent a sauce for it, they would eat us up; a calf's liver or a Christian's would be all the same to them,' said Granny Bonnébault.

She lifted up her malignant features as the General passed; but in the twinkling of an eye a hypocritical expression of honeyed amiability overspread her face, and with an ingratiating grin she hastily made a deep curtsey.

'What! are you gleaning too, when my wife has put you in the way of earning plenty of money?'

'Eh! God keep you in health, my dear gentleman! But, you see, that lad of mine eats everything up, and I be forced to hide away this little mite of corn to have bread to eat in the winter. So I be gleaning again for a bit—it all helps!'

The gleaners made little that year. When the farmers and crofters knew that they would be supported, they cut their corn carefully and looked after the sheaves, and saw that the fields were clear, in such a sort that there was, at any rate, less of the open robbery of previous harvests.

This year, too, the gleaners looked in vain for the wheat which always made a certain proportion of their bundles; and impostors and paupers, who had forgotten their pardon at Conches, cherished in consequence a

smothered feeling of discontent, embittered in tavern talk by the Tonsards, by Courtecuisse, Bonnébault, Laroche, Vaudoyer, Godain, and their following. Matters grew worse after the vintage, for no one was allowed to go into the vineyards until the grapes were all cut, and the vines had been very closely picked over; Sibilet had seen to that. This exasperated the peasants to the last degree; but when there is so great a gulf set between the class which rises in menace and the class which is threatened, words are not carried across it; deeds are the only sign of the matters which are brewing, and the malcontents betake themselves to work underground like moles.

The fair at Soulanges went off quietly enough save for some amenities that passed between the best society and the second-rate, thanks to the queen's uneasy despotism. It was intolerable to her that the fair Euphémie Plissoud should reign over the brilliant Lupin's heart, when his fickle affections should have been centred upon herself.

The Count and Countess had appeared neither at the fair, nor at the Tivoli, and this was counted as a crime by the Soudrys and Gaubertins and their adherents. It was all pride and superciliousness, so they said in Mme. Soudry's drawing-room.

Meanwhile the Countess was filling up the blank left by Émile's absence by the great interest which noble natures take in the good which they try to do; and the Count threw no less zeal into the improvements on his estate, which he intended to effect a corresponding improvement both material and moral in the people of the district. Little by little, with the help of the Abbé Brossette, Mme. de Montcornet came to have an accurate knowledge of the circumstances of the poor families, of their requirements and their means of subsistence, and learned how much thoughtful care was needed to give them assistance by helping them to work, lest they should be encouraged in lazy or idle habits.

The Countess had placed Geneviève Niseron in a convent, under the pretext of having her taught to do needlework sufficiently well to be employed in her household; but in reality Geneviève was sent out of reach of Nicolas Tonsard, whom Rigou had managed to exempt from military service. The Countess thought, moreover, that a devout education, and the guarded seclusion of the convent, would sooner or later quell the ardent passions of a precocious child whose fiery Montenegrin blood seemed to her at times to threaten to break into a flame which might consume her faithful Olympe Michaud's happiness.

So there was tranquillity at the Aigues. The Count, reassured by Michaud, and lulled into security by Sibilet, congratulated himself upon his firmness, and thanked his wife for contributing by her beneficence to the great result of their tranquillity. As for the sale of the timber, the General held the question over till he could return to Paris and arrange in person with wood merchants. He had not the slightest idea of the way in which the business was carried on, and was far from suspecting the extent of Gaubertin's influence along the Yonne, or that the mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes supplied the larger part of Paris with fuel.

VII

THE GREYHOUND

About the middle of September, Émile came back to the Aigues. He had gone to Paris to arrange for the publication of a book, and now he meant to rest and to think over the work which he was planning for the winter. At the Aigues the wearied journalist dis-

appeared, and Émile Blondet became once more frank, fresh-hearted, as in the days of his early manhood.

'What a beautiful nature!' said the Count and Countess when they spoke of him.

Men accustomed to knock about in the world, to see the seamy side of life, and to gather in experience of all kinds without restraint, make an oasis in their hearts, and leave their own evil tendencies and those of others outside it. Within a narrow charmed circle they become saints in miniature; they have a woman's sensitiveness, with their whole souls they strive for a momentary realisation of their ideal, and for the one soul in the world who worships them they raise themselves to angelic heights. Nor are they playing a comedy. They turn the inner self out to grass, as it were; they crave to have the stains of mud brushed off, their bruises healed, and their wounds bound. When Émile Blondet came to the Aigues he left malice behind, and with it most of his wit, not an epigram did he utter, he was as mild as a lamb, and suavely Platonic.

'He is such a good young fellow that I miss him when he is not here,' the General used to say. 'I should dearly like him to make his fortune and give up that Paris life.'

Never had the glorious landscape and the park at the Aigues been more luxuriantly beautiful than in those September days. In the earliest autumn weather, when earth is weary of bringing forth her fruits, and fills the air in the empty fields and orchards with the delicious scent of leaves, the forests are the most wonderful sight of all, for then they begin to take bronze-green hues and warm ochre tints, to blend in the fair tapestry beneath which they hide, as if to defy the coming cold of winter.

Earth in the spring looked gay and joyous, a dark-haired maid who hopes and looks forward; Earth in the autumn, grown melancholy and mild, is a fair-haired

woman who remembers. The grass grows golden, the heads of the autumn flowers are crowned with pale petals, the white daisies look up seldom now from the lawn, and you see the purplish-green calices instead. There is yellow colour everywhere. The trees cast thinner and darker shadows; the sun, slanting lower already, steals under them to leave faint gleams of orange colour, and long luminous shafts, which vanish swiftly over the ground like the trailing robes of women departing.

On the morning of the second day after his arrival, Émile stood at the window of his room, which gave upon one of the terraces, from which there was a beautiful view. The Countess's apartments were likewise upon the terrace, and faced the view towards Blangy and the forests. The pond (which nearer Paris would have been styled a lake) and its long channel were almost out of sight, but the silver spring which rose in the wood near the hunting lodge crossed the lawn like a silken ribbon covered with bright spangles of sand.

Beyond the park palings lay fields where cattle were grazing, and little properties, full of walnut and apple-trees, enclosed by hedges, stood out against the hillside, covered with the walls and houses and cultivated land of Blangy, and higher yet, ridges covered with tall forest trees rose up stepwise to the heights which framed the whole picture.

The Countess had come out upon the terrace to see her flowers, which filled the air with their morning fragrance. She wore a loose cambric wrapper, through which her pretty shoulders sent a faint rose flush; a dainty cap sat piquantly on her hair, which strayed rebelliously from beneath it; her little foot shone through the transparent stocking; and whenever the wind stirred, it fluttered her thin dressing-gown, giving glimpses of an embroidered cambric petticoat carelessly fastened over her corset.

'Oh, are you there?' asked she.

'Yes ——'

'What are you looking at?'

'What a question to ask! You have snatched me from the contemplation of nature.—Tell me, Countess, will you take a walk in the woods this morning before breakfast?'

'What an idea! You know that I hold walks in abhorrence.'

'We will only walk a very short way. I will drive you in the tilbury, and Joseph can come with us to look after it. You never set foot in your forest, and I notice something odd in it: little groups of trees here and there have turned the colour of Florentine bronze; the leaves are withering——'

'Very well, I will dress at once.'

'We should not start for two hours! No. Take a shawl and a hat—— and thick shoes, that is all that is necessary.'

'You must always have your way—— I will come back in one moment.'

'General, we are going out, will you come with us?' called Blondet, going away to waken the Count, who replied by the grunt of a man still locked in morning slumber.

Fifteen minutes later the tilbury was moving slowly along one of the broad avenues through the park, followed at a distance by a stalwart servant on horseback.

It was a true September morning. Spaces of dark-blue sky shone in a cloud-dappled heaven, as if they, and not the clouds, were flitting over the ether of space. Long streaks of ultramarine blue, alternating with folds of cloud, lay like ribs of sand low down on the horizon, and higher up, above the forest, a greenish tint overspread the sky. Earth lay warm under the cloudy covering, like a woman just awakened. The forest scents were mingled with the scent of the ploughed

land, a wild savour in the steaming fragrance of the soil. The bell was ringing for the Angelus at Blangy; the notes, blended with the mysterious sound of the wind in the woods, made harmony with the silence. Here and there thin white mists were rising.

Olympe Michaud, seeing these fair preparations for the day, took it into her head to go out with her husband, who was obliged to give an order to one of the keepers who lived a short distance away. The Soulanges doctor had recommended her to take walks without overtiring herself, but she was afraid of the heat at noon, and did not care to venture out in the evening. Michaud went with her, and took his favourite dog, a mouse-coloured greyhound spotted with white; greedy, like all greyhounds, and full of faults, like all animals who know they are loved and have the gift of pleasing.

So it happened that when the tilbury reached the hunting-lodge and the Countess inquired after Mme. Michaud's health, she was told that Olympe had gone into the forest with her husband.

'This weather inspires the same thought in every one,' said Blondet, turning the horse into one of the six roads at random. 'By the by, Joseph, do you know the forest?'

'Yes, sir.'

And away they went. The avenue which they had chosen was one of the loveliest in the forest; after a little while it swerved round, and became a narrow winding track. The sun shone down into it through the chinks in the leafy roof, which closed it in like a green bower; the breeze brought the scent of thyme and lavender and wild peppermint, and sounds of dead branches and leaves falling to earth with a rustling sigh; the drops of dew scattered over the leaves and grass were shaken and fell as the light carriage went past. The further the two travellers went, the deeper they penetrated into the mysterious fantasies of the forest; into

cool depths where the leaves grow in the damp and darkness, and the light that enters turns to velvet as it dies away; through clearer spaces of graceful birch-trees gathered about their over-lord, the Hercules of the forest, a hundred-year-old beech; through assemblies of grand tree trunks, knotted, mossy, pale-coloured, riven with deep furrows, tracing gigantic blurred shadows over the ground. Along the side of the way they took grew a border of thin grass and delicate flowers. The streams had singing voices. Surely it is an unspeakable delight to drive along forest tracks, slippery with moss, when the woman by your side clings to you in real or simulated terror at every up and down of the road. You feel the fresh warmth, the involuntary or deliberate pressure, of her arm, the weight of a soft white shoulder, she begins to smile if you tell her that she is bringing you to a standstill, and the horse seems to understand these interruptions, and looks to right and left.

The Countess grew dreamy. The sight of this forest world, so vigorous in its effects, so unfamiliar and so grand, was new to her. She leaned back in the tilbury and gave herself up to the pleasure of being beside Émile. His eyes were occupied, his heart spoke to hers, and a voice within her gave response. Émile stole a glance at her, and enjoyed her mood of meditative dreaming. The ribbon-strings of her hood had come unfastened, and given to the morning wind the silken curls of her fair hair in luxuriant abandonment. They drove on as chance directed, and in consequence were confronted by a closed gate across the road. They had not the key; and Joseph, when summoned, proved to be likewise unprovided.

'Very well, let us walk. Joseph shall stay here with the tilbury; we shall easily find our way back.'

Émile and the Countess plunged into the forest, and reached a spot whence they saw a little landscape set in the woods, such a scene as you often see in a great forest.

Twenty years ago the charcoal-burners had cleared the space for their charcoal kiln, burning everything for a considerable area round about, and the trees had not grown again. But in twenty years Nature had had time to make a flower garden there; and even as a painter will paint some one picture for himself, she had made a garden of her own. Tall trees grew round about that delicious pleasance, their crests drooped over it in a deep fringe, like a great canopy above the couch where the goddess reposes.

The charcoal-burners had beaten a path to the edge of a pool of water, always clear and full to the brim. The path still existed, tempting you to follow it by a coquettish bend, till suddenly it was rent across, displaying a sheer surface of earth, where myriads of tree roots, exposed to the air, grew interwoven like canvas for tapestry work. Short green turf surrounded the lonely pool, a few willows and an aspen here and there spread a light veil of shadow over a bank of soft grass, laid down by some meditative or ease-loving charcoal-burner. Frogs leap and tadpoles swim undisturbed, moor-hens and water-fowl come and go, a hare flies from your presence, the delightful bathing-place, decked with the tallest of green rushes, is at your disposal. The trees above your head take many shapes; here a trunk raises its head like a boa-constrictor, there the beeches shoot up straight and tall as Grecian columns, to their green crests. Slugs and snails promenade in peace, a tench shows its nose above the surface of the pool, a squirrel eyes you curiously.

When Émile and the Countess sat down to rest at last, some bird broke the silence with an autumn song—a song of farewell to which all the other birds listened, one of those songs which awaken passionate response in the listener, and appeal to all the senses.

'How silent it is!' said the Countess; she felt moved, and lowered her voice as if she feared to trouble that peace.

They gazed at the green patches on the water, little worlds of growing and living organisms, and bade each other see the lizard basking in the sun; at their approach it fled, justifying its nickname—the 'friend of man.' 'Which proves how well he knows man!' commented Émile. They watched the bolder frogs return to the bed of cresses by the water's edge, and show their eyes sparkling like carbuncles. The sense of the simple and tender mystery of nature passed little by little into these two souls, on whom the artificialities of the world had palled, and steeped them in a mood of contemplative emotion——when, suddenly, Blondet shuddered and leant towards the Countess to whisper—

'Do you hear that?'

'What?'

'A strange sound.'

'Just like these literary people, who stay in their studies and know nothing of the country. That is a woodpecker making a hole in a tree. I will wager that you do not even know the most curious thing about the woodpecker. Every time that he gives a tap (and he gives hundreds of taps to hollow out an oak twice as thick as your body), he goes round to the back of it to see if he has pierced a hole through.'

'That noise, dear lecturer on natural history, was not made by a bird; there was that indescribable something in it which reveals a human intelligence at work.'

The Countess was seized with a panic of fear. She fled across the little wild garden, reached the path again, and seemed bent on flight from the forest.

'What is the matter?' cried Blondet, hurrying after her anxiously.

'I thought that I saw eyes,' she said, when they had gained one of the paths by which they had come to the clearing made by the charcoal-burners.

Even as she spoke, they both heard another sound—the dying moan of some creature, a stifled sound, as if

its throat had been suddenly cut. The Countess's fears were redoubled; she fled so swiftly that Blondet could scarcely keep pace with her. On and on she fled, like a will-of-the-wisp; she did not hear Émile's cry—'It is a mistake!' Still she ran, and Blondet, instead of overtaking her, fell more and more behind.

At length they came upon Michaud walking with his wife on his arm. Émile was panting, and the Countess so much out of breath that it was some time before they could speak and explain what had happened. Michaud, like Blondet, scoffed at the lady's fears, and put the straying pair in the way to find the tilbury. When they reached the bar across the road, Olympe Michaud called to the dog.

'Prince! Prince!' shouted the forester. He whistled and whistled again, but no dog appeared. Then Émile mentioned the mysterious sounds with which the adventure began.

'My wife heard the sound,' said Michaud, 'and I laughed at her.'

'Some one has killed Prince!' cried the Countess. 'I am sure of it now; they must have cut his throat at a stroke, for the sound which I heard was the dying groan of some animal.

'The devil!' said Michaud; 'this is worth looking into.

Émile and the forester left the two women with Joseph and the horses, and turned back into the cleared space. They went down to the pond, searched among the knolls, and found not a sign nor a trace of the dog. Blondet was the first to climb the bank again; and noticing a tree with withered leaves, he called Michaud's attention to it, and determined to examine it for himself. The two men struck out a straight line through the forest, avoiding the fallen trunks, dense holly thickets, and brambles in their way, and reached the tree in question.

'It is a fine elm,' said Michaud, 'but there is a wood-worm at the root of it—a worm has ringed the bark at the foot.' He stooped down and lifted up the bark: 'There, only see what work!'

'There are a good many wood-worms in this forest of yours,' said Blondet.

As he spoke, Michaud saw a red drop a few paces away, and further yet, his greyhound's head. He heaved a sigh. 'The rascals!—my lady was right.'

Blondet and Michaud went up to the body. The Countess was right. The dog's throat had been cut. Prince had been coaxed by a bit of pickled pork to prevent him from barking, for the morsel lay half swallowed between the tongue and the palate.

'Poor brute, his weakness caused his death.'

'Exactly the way with princes,' said Blondet.

'Some one was here who did not want to be found here, and made off,' said Michaud, 'so there is something seriously wrong. And yet I see no branches broken nor trees cut down.'

Blondet and the forester began a careful investigation, looking over every inch of ground before setting down their feet. At last Émile found that some one had been kneeling under a tree a few paces away, the grass was trodden down and bent, and there were two hollow dints in the moss.

'Some one has been kneeling here,' he said, 'and it was a woman, for a man's legs would not have crushed so much grass below the knees; look at the outline of the petticoat.'

The forester scanned the foot of the tree, and saw that a wood-maggot had begun its work; but there was no trace of the grub itself, with the tough glistening skin, the brown-tipped scales, the tail already something like that of the cockchafer, and the head provided with antennæ and two strong jaws with which the insect cuts the roots of plants.

'Now, my dear fellow, I can understand why there are such a quantity of dead trees in the forest. I noticed them this morning from the terrace at the château, and came here on purpose to discover the cause of that phenomenon. The worms are stirring, but it is your peasants who creep out of the woods.'

The head-forester let fly an oath. Then, followed by Blondet, he hurried to find the Countess, and begged her to take his wife home. He himself took Joseph's horse, leaving the man to walk back to the château, and gallopped off to intercept the woman who had killed his dog, and if possible to surprise her with the blood-stained billhook and the tool with which she made the holes in the trees. Blondet took his place between Mme. de Montcornet and Olympe Michaud, and told them of Prince's end, and of the miserable discovery to which it had led.

'Oh dear!' cried the Countess, 'let us tell the General about it before breakfast, or anger may kill him.'

'I will break the news to him,' said Blondet.

'They have killed the dog!' cried Olympe, drying her tears.

'You must have been very fond of Prince, dear child, to shed tears for a dog like this,' said the Countess.

'I look upon Prince's death simply as a warning of trouble to come; I am afraid lest anything should happen to my husband.'

'How they have spoiled this morning for us!' said the Countess, with an adorable little pout.

'How they are spoiling the country!' Olympe said sadly.

At the park gates they came upon the General.

'Where can you have been?' asked he.

'You shall hear directly,' said Blondet mysteriously, as he helped Mme. Michaud to alight. The General was struck by the sadness in Olympe's face.

A few minutes later, Blondet and the General stood on the terrace.

'You have plenty of moral courage,' said Émile Blondet; 'you will not fly into a passion, will you?'

'No,' said the General, 'but out with it, or I shall think that you want to laugh at me.'

'Do you see those trees with the dead leaves on them?'

'Yes.'

'And those others that are turning a lighter colour?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, those are so many dead trees; so many trees killed by the peasants whom you thought that you had won over by your kindness'; and Blondet told the tale of that morning's adventures.

The General grew so pale that Blondet was alarmed.

'Come,' he cried, 'curse and swear, fly into a rage!—repression may perhaps be even worse for you than an outbreak of anger.'

'I shall go and smoke,' said the Count, and off he went to his summer-house.

Michaud came as they sat at breakfast; he had found nobody. The Count had sent for Sibilet, and he also appeared.

'Monsieur Sibilet and Monsieur Michaud, let it be known in the right quarters that I will give a thousand francs to anybody who will enable me to detect those who injure my trees at their work. The tool with which they work must be discovered, and the place where it was purchased, and—I have a plan ready.'

'Those people never sell themselves when a crime has been deliberately committed for their own profit,' said Sibilet; 'for there is no denying that this diabolical invention has been deliberately planned——'

'Yes. But a thousand francs means one or two acres of land.'

'We will try,' said Sibilet. 'For fifteen hundred francs we shall find a traitor, I will answer for it, more particularly if we keep his secret.'

'But we must all, and I most of all, act as though

we knew nothing about it,' said the Count. 'It should rather be you who discover it without my knowledge; they must not know that I know, or we may fall victims to some new combination. More caution is needed with these brigands than with the enemy in time of war.'

'Why, this is the enemy,' said Blondet. Sibilet gave him a quick furtive glance; he evidently understood the remark, and he went.

'I do not like that Sibilet of yours,' Blondet continued, when he had heard the man go out of the house; 'he is not to be trusted.'

'I have had no reason to complain of him so far,' said the General.

Blondet went to write some letters. He had quite lost the careless high spirits of his first visit, and looked anxious and preoccupied. He had no vague forebodings like Mme. Michaud, his was a clear vision of inevitable troubles. To himself he said—

'All this will come to a bad end; and if the General does not make up his mind at once to retire from a battlefield where he is outnumbered, there will be many victims. Who knows whether he himself or his wife will come out safe and sound? Good heavens! to think that she should be exposed to such risks, so adorable, so devoted, so perfect as she is. And he thinks that he loves her! Well, I will share their peril, and if I cannot save them, I will perish with them.'

VIII

RUSTIC VIRTUES

At nightfall Marie Tonsard was sitting on the edge of a culvert on the Soulanges road, waiting for Bonnébault, who, according to his usual custom, had spent the day at

the café. She heard him while he was yet some distance away, and knew from his footsteps that he was drunk, and that he had lost at play, for he used to sing when he had been winning.

'Is that you, Bonnébault?

'Yes, little girl.'

'What is the matter?'

'I have lost twenty-five francs, and they may wring my neck twenty-five times before I shall find them.'

'Well, now, there is a way for us to make five hundred,' she said in his ear.

'Oh! yes, somebody to be killed; but I have a mind to live——'

'Just hold your tongue. Vaudoyer will give us the money if you will let them catch your mother at a tree——'

'I would rather kill a man than sell my mother. There is your own grandmother Tonsard; why don't you give her up?'

'If I tried it, father would be angry, he would put a stop to the game.'

'That is true. All the same, my mother shall not go to prison.—Poor old soul! she finds me clothes and victual, how, I do not know. Send her to prison, and by my own doing! I should have neither heart nor bowels. No, no. I shall tell her this evening to leave off barking the trees, lest some one else should sell her.'

'Well, father will do as he pleases; I shall tell him that there are five hundred francs to be made, and he will ask grandmother whether she will or no. They would never put an old woman of seventy in prison; and if they do, she will be more comfortable there than in the garret.'

'Five hundred francs!—I will speak to mother about it,' said Bonnébault. 'After all, if that arrangement gives me the money, I will let her have some of it to live upon in prison. She can spin to amuse herself, she will be well fed and have a sound roof over her, and much less

trouble than she has at Conches. Good-bye till to-morrow, little girl—I have not time to talk to you.'

Next morning at five o'clock, as soon as it was light, Bonnébault and his mother rapped at the door of the *Grand-I-Vert*; old Granny Tonsard was the only person out of bed.

'Marie!' shouted Bonnébault, 'it is a bargain!'

'Is that yesterday's affair about the trees?' asked Granny Tonsard. 'That is all settled, they are going to catch *me*.'

'You, indeed! My boy has M. Rigou's promise for an acre of land for the money'; and the two old women quarrelled as to which of them should be sold by their children. The sound of the dispute roused the house; Tonsard and Bonnébault each took the part of his parent.

'Pull straws for it,' suggested La Tonsard, the daughter-in-law.

The straws decided in favour of the *Grand-I-Vert*.

Three days later, at daybreak, the gendarmes arrested Granny Tonsard in the depths of the forest, and took her away to Ville-aux-Fayes. She was caught in the act by the head-forester, the keepers, and the rural policeman. In her possession they found a cheap file, with which she made an incision in the tree, and a bradawl, with which she made the ring-shaped gash to imitate the insect's track. In the indictment it was stated that this treacherous operation had been performed upon no fewer than sixty trees within a radius of five hundred paces, and Granny Tonsard was committed for trial at the Assizes at Auxerre.

When Michaud saw the old crone at the foot of the tree, he could not help exclaiming—

'These are the people on whom M. le Comte and Mme. la Comtesse heap kindnesses! My word, if my lady would listen to me, she would not portion that Tonsard girl, who is even more worthless than the grandmother.'

The old woman turned her grey eyes on Michaud with a viperous glance. And, in fact, when the Count knew the author of the crime, he forbade his wife to give anything to Catherine Tonsard.

'And so much the better, M. le Comte,' said Sibilet, 'for it has come to my knowledge that Godain bought that field of his three days before Catherine came to speak to my lady. The pair of them evidently counted on the effect of the scene and on her ladyship's compassion. Catherine is quite capable of putting herself in her present case on purpose to ask for the money, for Godain counts for nothing in the business——'

'What people!' said Blondet; 'our black sheep in Paris are saints in comparison——'

'Ah, sir,' Sibilet broke in, 'all sorts of horrible things are done from mercenary motives hereabouts. Do you know who it was that betrayed the Tonsard?'

'No——'

'Her granddaughter Marie. Her sister is going to be married, and she is jealous, and so, to settle herself——'

'It is shocking!' said the Count. 'Then would they commit a murder?'

'Yes,' said Sibilet, 'and for a mere nothing. That sort of people set little value on life; they are tired of continual toil. Ah! sir, in out-of-the-way country places things are no better than in Paris, but you would not believe it.'

'Then be kind and benevolent to them,' said the Countess.

On the evening after Granny Tonsard's arrest, Bonnébault looked in at the *Grand-I-Vert*, and found the whole Tonsard family in great jubilation.

'Yes, yes,' said he, 'you may rejoice! I have just heard from Vaudoyer that the Countess is going back on her promise of Godain's thousand francs. Her husband will not allow her to give the money.'

'It is that rascal Michaud who gave the advice,' said

Tonsard; 'mother overheard him. She told me about it at Ville-aux-Fayes when I went over to take all her things and some money. Well and good, let her keep her thousand francs; our five hundred francs will go part of the way towards paying for Godain's land, and we will have our revenge, Godain, you and I. Aha! so Michaud interferes in our little affairs, does he? He will get more harm than good that way.—What does it matter to him, I ask you? Did it happen in his woods? And besides, it was he that raised all this racket. That is as true as 'tis that he found out the trick that day when mother slit the dog's gullet. And how if I in my turn begin to meddle in matters at the château? How if I bring the General word that his wife goes out walking in the woods of a morning with a young man, no matter for the dew; one had need have warm feet to do that——'

'The General! the General!' broke in Courtecuisse, 'any one can do as they like with *him*; it is Michaud who puts him up to things, a fussy fellow who does not understand his own trade. Things went quite otherwise in my time.'

'Ah!' said Tonsard, 'those were fine times for us all, Vaudoyer, were they not?'

'The fact is,' replied Vaudoyer, 'that if an end was made of Michaud, we should live in peace.'

'That is enough prattle,' said Tonsard; 'we will talk about this seriously later on, by moonlight, out in the open.'

Towards the end of October the Countess went back to town and left the General at the Aigues. He was not prepared to follow for some time to come, but she was unwilling to lose the opening of the opera season at the Théâtre-Italien; and, moreover, she felt lonely and dull now that Émile had left them, for his society had helped her to pass the time while the General went about the country and saw to his affairs.

Winter set in in earnest with November, the weather was grey and gloomy with spells of cold thaw, rain, and snow. Granny Tonsard's trial came on, witnesses must make the journey to Auxerre, and Michaud went to make his deposition. M. Rigou was seized with pity for the old woman, and found her counsel, a barrister who dwelt in his defence on the fact that all the witnesses for the prosecution were interested parties, while there were no witnesses for the defence, but the evidence given by Michaud and the keepers was corroborated by the rural policeman and two of the gendarmes. This decided the day, and Tonsard's mother was sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

'Michaud's evidence did it all,' the barrister told Tonsard.

IX

THE CATASTROPHE

One Saturday evening, Courtecuisse, Bonnébault, Godain, Tonsard, and his wife and daughters, Daddy Fourchon, Vaudoyer, and a few labourers sat at supper at the *Grand-I-Vert*. Outside there was a dim moon, and a frost of the kind that dries the ground. The first fallen snow had melted and frozen, so that a man walking over the land left no tell-tale footprints to put the pursuit of justice on his track. The hares for the stew off which they were supping had been caught in traps. The whole party were laughing and drinking, for it was the morrow of Catherine Godain's wedding, and they were going to bring the bride home. Godain's new house was not far from Courtecuisse's little farm; for when Rigou sold an acre of land, he took care to sell an isolated plot somewhere on the edge of the woods.

Courtecuisse and Vaudoyer had come with their guns to escort the bride. The whole countryside was sleeping; there was not a light to be seen. Only the wedding party were awake, and their boisterous mirth was at its loudest when Bonnébault's old mother came in. At that hour of night every one looked up in surprise at her, but she spoke in a low voice to Tonsard and her own son.

'It looks as if the wife's time had come,' she said. '*He* has just had his horse saddled; he is going to Soulanges for Dr. Gourdon.'

'Sit you down, mother,' said Tonsard, and, resigning his seat at the table, he laid himself at full length on a bench.

As he did so, they heard a horse pass by at full gallop along the road. Tonsard, Courtecuisse, and Vaudoyer went at once to the door, and saw Michaud riding through the village.

'How well he understands his business!' said Courtecuisse; 'he went round past the front of the château, he is taking the Blangy road, it is the safest——'

'Yes,' said Tonsard, 'but he will bring Dr. Gourdon back with him.'

'Perhaps he will not find him at home,' objected Courtecuisse; 'Dr. Gourdon was expected at Conches for the postmistress, who is putting people out at this time of night.'

'Why, then he will go by the high road from Soulanges to Conches, that is the shortest way.'

'And the surest for us,' said Courtecuisse; 'there is a bright moonlight just now. There are no keepers along the high road as there are in the woods; you can hear anybody a long way off; and from the lodge gates there, behind the hedges, just where the coppice begins, you can hit a man in the back, as if he were a rabbit, at five hundred paces——'

'It will be half-past eleven before he goes past the

place,' said Tonsard. 'It will take him half an hour to reach Soulanges, and another half hour to come back. . . Look here though, boys, suppose that M. Gourdon was on the road——'

'Don't trouble yourself,' said Courtecuisse; 'I shall be ten minutes' distance away from you on the direct road to Blangy, on the Soulanges side, and Vaudoyer will be ten minutes away on the Conches side. If anybody comes along, a post-chaise, the mail coach, or the gendarmes, or anything whatever, we will fire into the earth, a smothered shot.'

'And if I miss him?'

'He is right,' said Courtecuisse.—'I am a better shot than you are; Vaudoyer, I will go with you. Bonnébault will take my post; he can call out, a shout is easier to hear, and not so suspicious.'

The three men went back into the tavern, and they kept up the festivity; but at eleven o'clock Vaudoyer, Courtecuisse, Tonsard, and Bonnébault turned out with their guns, none of the women paying any attention to this. Three-quarters of an hour later, moreover, they came in again, and sat drinking until one o'clock in the morning. Catherine and Marie, with their mother and Bonnébault, had plied the rest of the party with drink, until the miller, the labourers, and the two peasants, like Daddy Fourchon, lay snoring on the floor, when the four set out on their errand. When they came back they shook the sleepers, whom they found as they left them, each in his place.

While this orgy went on, Michaud's household endured the most cruel anxiety. Olympe had been taken with false labour-pains, and her husband had started in all haste to summon the doctor. But the poor woman's pains ceased as soon as Michaud was out of the house. Her mind was full of the possible risks which her husband might be running at that late hour in a hostile country full of determined scoundrels; and so strong was

her anguish of soul, that for the time being it quelled physical suffering. In vain did her servant tell her again and again that her fears were imaginary; she did not seem to understand the words, and sat by the fireside in her room, listening to every sound without. In an agony of terror, which grew from second to second, she called up the man to give him an order which she did not give. The poor little woman walked to and fro in feverish agitation. She went to the windows and looked out, she threw them open in spite of the cold, then she went downstairs, opened the door into the yard, and looked out into the distance and listened.

'Nothing——,' she said, 'nothing yet,' and she went up to her room again in despair.

About a quarter-past twelve she cried out, 'Here he is; I hear his horse,' and went downstairs, followed by the man, who went to open the great gate.

'It is strange,' she said; 'he has come back by way of Conches and the forest.'

She stood like one horror-struck, motionless and dumb. The man shared her dismay; for in the frantic gallop of the horse, and the clank of the empty stirrups, there had been a mysterious sound, which told of something wrong, accompanied by the significant neighing which a horse only gives when alone. Soon, too soon for the unhappy wife, the horse reached the park gate, panting and covered with foam, but the horse was riderless, and the bridle, which doubtless had hindered his flight, was broken. Olympe watched with haggard eyes as the man opened the gate, saw the empty saddle, and without a word turned and fled to the château like one distraught. She reached the house and fell beneath the General's windows with the cry—

'Monsieur! they have murdered him!'

Her shriek was so terrible that it woke the Count; he rang the bell and roused the household. The moans of Mme. Michaud, who was delivered of a stillborn child

as she lay on the earth, brought out the General and the servants. They raised up the unhappy dying woman. 'They have killed him!' she said when she saw the General, and died with the words on her lips.

'Joseph!' the Count called to his man, 'run and fetch the doctor! Perhaps it is not too late.—No; you had better go for M. le Curé, she is dead, poor woman, and the child is dead.—Great heavens! what a mercy that my wife is not here! Go and see what has happened,' he added, turning to the gardener.

'This has happened,' said the man from the hunting-lodge, 'M. Michaud's horse has come back without him, the bridle is cut, there is blood on his legs. There is a drop of blood on the saddle.'

'What can we do to-night?' said the Count. 'Go and call up Groison, find the keepers, saddle the horses, and we will beat up the country.'

In the grey light of the morning, eight men—the Count, Groison, the three keepers, and two gendarmes, who had come over from Soulanges with the quartermaster—were out searching the country; but it was mid-day before they found the dead body of the head-forester, in a coppice about five hundred paces from the Conches gate, in the corner of the park between the high road and the road to Ville-aux-Fayes.

Two gendarmes were despatched—one to Ville-aux-Fayes for the public prosecutor, and the other to the justice of the peace at Soulanges—and meanwhile the General drew up a report with the assistance of the quartermaster. There were marks in the road opposite the park gates where the horse had swerved and reared, and deep dints made by the hoofs of the runaway continued as far as the first footpath into the wood beyond the hedge. The animal had taken the shortest way back to the stable. A bullet was lodged in Michaud's back, and the spine was broken.

Groison and the quartermaster went all over the

ground round about the spot where the horse had reared, the 'scene of the murder,' as it is called in criminal reports, but with all their sagacity they could discover no clue. The ground was frozen so hard that there was not a sign of the footprints of Michaud's murderer, and a spent cartridge was the only thing which they found.

When the public prosecutor arrived with the examining magistrate and Dr. Gourdon, and the body was removed for the post-mortem examination, it was ascertained that the ball, which corresponded with the waste cartridge, was a regulation bullet discharged from a rifle, and that there was not a single rifle in the commune of Blangy. That evening at the château the examining magistrate and M. Soudry, the public prosecutor, were of the opinion that these facts should be put in the form of a report, and that they had better wait. The lieutenant from Ville-aux-Fayes and the quartermaster were of the same mind.

'The shot must have been fired by somebody belonging to the neighbourhood,' said the quartermaster, 'but there are two communes in the case, and there are five or six men in Conches and Blangy who are quite capable of the act.—Tonsard, whom I should suspect the most, spent the night in drinking. Why, Langlumé the miller, your deputy, General, was of the wedding party; he was there the whole time. They were so drunk that they could not stand upright, and they brought the bride home at half-past one, while it is evident from the return of Michaud's horse that he was murdered between eleven and twelve o'clock. At a quarter-past ten Groison saw the whole party at table, M. Michaud went that way to Soulanges, and he was in Soulanges by eleven o'clock. His horse swerved and pawed the ground on the road by the lodge gates, but Michaud might have received the shot before he reached Blangy, and have held on for some time afterwards. Warrants must be issued for twenty persons at the least,

and every one under suspicion must be arrested; but these gentlemen know the peasants as well as I do; you may keep them in prison for a year, and you will get nothing out of them but denials. What do you mean to do with the party in Tonsard's place?'

Langlumé, the miller and deputy mayor, was summoned, and he gave his version of the evening's events. They were all in the tavern, he said, no one left it except to go into the yard for a few minutes. He himself had gone out with Tonsard about eleven o'clock; something was said about the moon and the weather; they had heard nothing. He gave the names of all the party, not one of them had left the place, and towards two o'clock in the morning they had gone home with the newly married couple.

The General and the public prosecutor, taking counsel with the lieutenant and the quartermaster, determined to send to Paris for a clever detective, who should come to the château as a workman, and be turned away for bad conduct. He should drink and assiduously frequent the *Grand-I-Vert*, and hang about the country in discontent with the General. It was the best way of lying in wait to catch a chance indiscretion.

'I will discover poor Michaud's murderer in the end if I should have to spend twenty thousand francs over it!' General Montcornet never wearied of repeating those words.

He went to Paris with this idea in his head, and returned in the month of January with one of the cleverest detectives in the force, who came ostensibly as foreman of the work at the château, and took to poaching. Formal complaints were made by the keepers, and the General turned him away. In February the Comte de Montcornet returned to Paris.

X

THE VICTORY OF THE VANQUISHED

One evening in May, when summer weather had come, and the Parisians had returned to the Aigues, M. de Troisville, whom his daughter had brought with her, Blondet, the Abbé Brossette, the General, and the sub-prefect from Ville-aux-Fayes, who had come on a visit, were playing at whist and chess. It was half-past eleven o'clock when Joseph came in to tell his master that the bad workman who had been dismissed wished to speak with him; the man said that the General still owed him money. He was very drunk, the valet reported.

'All right, I will go out to him,' said the General, and he went out on the lawn at some distance from the house.

'M. le Comte, there is nothing to be made of these people,' said the detective. 'All that I can find out is simply this—that if you stay here and persist in trying to break the people of the bad habits which they were allowed to contract in Mlle. Laguerre's time, the next shot will be fired at *you*. I can do nothing more here after this; they suspect me even more than your keepers.'

The Count paid the detective, and the man took his leave; his departure only confirmed previous suspicions of the perpetrators of the crime. When the General went back to join the party in the drawing-room, his face bore traces of such deep and keen emotion, that his wife came to him anxiously asking for news.

'Dearest,' he said, 'I do not want to frighten you, and yet it is right that you should know that Michaud's death was meant for an indirect warning to us to quit——'

'For my own part,' said M. de Troisville, 'I should

not think of going. I had these same difficulties in Normandy under another form; I persisted, and now everything goes well.'

'Normandy and Burgundy are two different countries, my lord Marquis,' said the sub-prefect. The fruit of the vine is more heating to the blood than the fruit of the apple-tree. We are not so learned here in legal quibbles, and we are surrounded by forests; we have as yet few industries; we are savages, in fact. If I have any advice to give to M. le Comte, it is this—to sell his land and invest the money in the funds. He would double his income, and he would not have the slightest trouble. If he has a liking for a country life, he can have an estate near Paris, a château as fine as the château of the Aigues, a park enclosed by walls which no one will climb, and farms which he can let to tenants who will come in a cabriolet to pay their rents with bank-notes. He will not need to make out a single summons in twelve months. He can go and come in three or four hours.—And, then, Mme. la Comtesse, M. Blondet and my lord Marquis would visit you more frequently——'

'Shall *I* fly before the peasants, I, who stood my ground on the Danube?'

'Yes, but where are your Cuirassiers?' asked Blondet.

'Such a fine estate——'

'It will fetch more than two millions of francs to-day.'

'The château alone must have cost as much,' said M. de Troisville.

'One of the finest properties for twenty leagues round,' said the sub-prefect, 'but you will find better near Paris.'

'What would two million francs bring in, invested in the funds?' inquired the Countess.

'At the present time, about forty thousand francs,' said Blondet.

'The Aigues would not bring you in more than thirty thousand all told,' said the Countess, 'and then of late

years you have spent an immense amount upon it, you have had ditches made round the woods.'

'You can have a royal château just now on the outskirts of Paris for four hundred thousand francs. You reap the benefit of other people's follies.'

'I thought that you were fond of the Aigues,' the Count said to his wife.

'But do you not feel that your life is a thousand times more to me than the Aigues?' said she. 'And besides, since the death of poor Olympe and Michaud's murder, the country has grown hateful to me. I seem to see threats and a sinister expression in every face.'

The next morning, when the sub-prefect came into M. Gaubertin's drawing-room at Ville-aux-Fayes, the mayor greeted him with—'Well, M. des Lupeaulx, have you come from the Aigues?'

'Yes,' said the sub-prefect, with a shade of triumph in his manner. He shot a tender glance at Mlle. Élise as he added, 'I am afraid that we are going to lose the General; he is about to sell his estate——'

'M. Gaubertin, I beg of you not to forget my lodge—I cannot bear the noise and dust of Ville-aux-Fayes any longer; like some poor imprisoned bird, I gasp for the air of the far-off fields and woods,' drawled Madame Isaure, her eyes half closed, her head thrown back over her left shoulder, while she languidly twisted her long pale ringlets.

'Pray be careful, madam!' said Gaubertin, lowering his voice, 'your babbling will not buy the lodge for us——'

Then he turned to the sub-prefect—

'So they still cannot find the perpetrators of the crime committed on the person of the head-forester?' he inquired.

'It seems that they cannot,' replied the sub-prefect.

'That will injure the sale of the Aigues very much,' announced Gaubertin to all who heard him; 'for my own part, I would not buy the place, I know. The peasants

are too troublesome. Even in Mlle. Laguerre's time I used to have trouble with them, though the Lord knows that she allowed them latitude enough.'

The month of May was drawing to a close, and there was nothing indicated that the General meant to sell the Aigues. He was hesitating. One night about ten o'clock he was returning from the forest by one of the six avenues which led to the hunting lodge; he was so near home that he had dismissed the keeper who went with him. At a turn in the avenue a man armed with a rifle came out from a bush.

'General,' he said, 'this is the third time that I have had you close to the muzzle of my gun, and this makes the third time that I have given you your life.'

'And why should you want to kill me, Bonnébault,' said the Count, without a sign of flinching.

'Faith! if I did not, it would be somebody else; and, you see, I myself have a liking for those who served under the Emperor, and I cannot make up my mind to shoot you like a partridge. Don't ask me about it; I don't mean to say anything.—But you have enemies who are more cunning and stronger than you are, and they will crush you at last. I am to have three thousand francs if I kill you, and I shall marry Marie Tonsard. Well, give me a few acres of waste and a cabin; I will go on saying, as I have said before, that I have not found an opportunity. You shall have time to sell your place and go away, but be quick. I am a good fellow still, scapegrace though I am; somebody else might do you a mischief.'

'And if I give you your demands,' said the General, 'will you tell me who it was that promised you the three thousand crowns?'

'I do not know; some one is pushing me on to do this, but I am too fond of that person to mention names. . . . And if I did, and if you knew that it was

Marie Tonsard, you would be no further. Marie would be as mute as a wall, and I should deny my words.'

'Come and see me to-morrow,' said the General.

'That is enough,' said Bonnébault; 'if they think that I am bungling the business, I will let you know.'

A week after this strange conversation, the district, the whole department—nay, Paris itself—was flooded with huge placards, wherein it was set forth that the Aigues was to be put up for sale in lots; applications to be made to Maître Corbinet, notary, Soulanges. All the lots were knocked down to Rigou, the total amount paid being two million one hundred and fifty thousand francs.

On the morrow of the sale the names of the buyers were changed. M. Gaubertin took the forest, Rigou and Soudry had the vineyards and the rest of the estate. The château and the park were resold to the Black Band, to be pulled down for building materials; only the hunting-lodge, with its dependencies, was allowed to stand—M. Gaubertin reserved it as a present for his poetical and sentimental spouse.

Many years went by. During the winter of 1837, Émile Blondet, one of the most remarkable political writers of the time, had reached the lowest depth of poverty, which he had hitherto concealed beneath the brilliant and elegant surface of his life. He was hesitating on the brink of a desperate resolve; he saw that his work, his wit and knowledge of men and affairs, had ended in nought, that he was a machine working for the benefit of others. He saw that all places were filled; he felt that he was growing older, and knew that he had neither wealth nor position. The place-men and incapables of the Restoration had succeeded to the bourgeois imbeciles and incapables, and the Government was reconstituted as it had been before 1830. One evening,

when suicide, at which he had scoffed so often, was hovering in his thoughts, he glanced finally over his unlucky life, in which work had filled a far larger space than the dissipation which slander imputed to him, and saw the fair and noble face of a woman rise out of the past, like a stainless and unbroken marble statue amid the dreariest ruins. His porter brought him a letter with a black seal. The Comtesse de Montcornet wrote to inform him of the death of her husband, who had returned to the army, and again commanded a division. She was his heir; she had no children. That letter, in spite of its womanly dignity, told Blondet that the woman of forty, whom he had loved in his youth, held out a comrade's hand to him and a considerable fortune.

Shortly afterwards a marriage took place between the Comtesse de Montcornet and M. Blondet, a newly-appointed prefect. He went to his prefecture by the route on which the Aigues formerly lay, and stopped the travelling carriage opposite the place where the park gates used to stand, to see once more the commune of Blangy, so thronged with tender memories for them both. The country was no longer recognisable. The mysterious woods, the avenues in the park, had been cleared away, the country looked like a tailor's chart of patterns. The Peasantry had taken possession of the soil as conquerors and by right of conquest; already it had been divided up into more than a thousand holdings; already the population of Blangy had trebled itself. The once beautiful park—so carefully ordered, so luxuriantly fair—was now an agricultural district, with one familiar building standing out in strong contrast against the changed background. This was the hunting-lodge, re-christened *Il Buen-Retiro* by Mme. Isaure Gaubertin, who had converted it into a villa residence. The building looked almost like a château, so miserable were the peasants' cabins scattered round about it.

'Behold the march of progress!' cried Émile. 'Here

is a page from Jean-Jacques' *Contrat Social.* And here am I, in harness, a part of the social machinery which brings about such results as these! Good heavens! what will become of kings in a little while? Nay, what will become of the nations themselves in fifty years' time, if this state of things continues?'

'You love me—you are at my side. . . . The present is very fair for me, and I hardly care to think of such a far-off future,' his wife answered.

'With you beside me, long live the Present! and the devil take the Future!' cried the enraptured Blondet.

He made a sign to the man, the horses sprang forward at a gallop, and the newly-wedded lovers resumed the course of their honeymoon.

The author of *The Peasantry* should be allowed to be sufficiently learned in the history of his own times to know that there never were any Cuirassiers of the Imperial Guard. He takes the liberty of stating here that he has in his study the uniforms of the Republic, the Empire, and the Restoration; a complete collection of the military costumes of every country which has fought with France as an enemy or as an ally; and more military works on the wars of 1792-1815 than any Marshal of France. He takes the opportunity, through the medium of the press, of thanking those persons who have honoured him by taking a sufficient interest in his work to correct his mistakes and send him information.

Once for all, he here states in reply that these inaccuracies are deliberately and designedly made. The story is not a *Scène de la Vie Militaire*, in which an author is bound not to equip his infantry men with sabretaches. Every attempt to deal with contemporary history, even through contemporary types, has its dangers. It is only by making use of a general scheme, in which all the details are minutely true, and all the facts severally altered by giving an unfamiliar colour to them, that the petty reef of 'personalities' can be avoided in fiction. In a previous case (*Une Ténébreuse Affaire*), although the facts belonged to history and the details had been altered, the

author was compelled to reply to ridiculous objections raised on the ground that there was but *one* senator kidnapped and confined in the time of the Empire. I quite believe it! Possibly he who should have abducted a second senator would have been crowned with flowers.

If this inaccuracy with regard to the Cuirassiers is too shocking, it is easy to suppress the mention of the Guard; though, in that case, the family of the illustrious General who commanded the regiment of horse which was pushed down to the edge of the Danube, might ask us to account for those eleven hundred thousand francs, which the Emperor allowed Montcornet to save in Pomerania.

We shall soon be requested to give the name of the geography book in which Ville-aux-Fayes and the Avonne and Soulanges are to be found. Let it be said that all these places, and the Cuirassiers of the Guard likewise, are to be found on those shores where the Master of Ravenswood's tower stands; there you will find Saint Ronan's Well and the lands of Tillietudlem and Gandercleugh and Lilliput and the Abbey of Thelema, and Hoffmann's privy councillors, and Robinson Crusoe's Island, and the estates of the Shandy Family; in that world no taxes are paid, and those who fain would make the voyage may travel thither post, at the rate of twenty centimes a volume.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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